

AMERICAN CRITICISM OF
HERMAN MELVILLE'S MOBY-DICK

1935-1950

BY

DAVID FLOOD

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MOBY-DICK

1935-1950

by

David Flood

Date:

August 1, 1951

Approved:

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts
in the Graduate School
of Arts and Sciences
of
Duke University

1951

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AMERICAN CRISTIAN OR

MOBY-DICK

1938-1980

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August 1, 1951

Date:

Approved:

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1951

A.D.
F. 251A

PREFACE

For the last fifteen years the field of Melville criticism has indeed been prolific. Perhaps no other book in American Literature has ever created the critical furor that Moby-Dick has recently. Although Moby-Dick has attracted the attention of America's finest critics, the mills of Melville criticism, more often than not, grind with a good deal of discord. The lack of unity among critics dealing with Moby-Dick presents a challenge, I feel, both to the book itself and to criticism in general. The recent critics have examined and discussed Melville with a thoroughness and scholarship accorded few American writers.

In a sense, Moby-Dick is an inexhaustible mine for critical investigation. The richness of the novel is clearly indicated in the criticism. This thesis is an historical survey of the criticism of Moby-Dick from 1935 to 1950. I have made no effort in the text to reconcile conflicting critical opinions. I believe that this is the responsibility of every reader of

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...the second year 1840. Perhaps no other book in American
...has ever created the original novel that Woe
...Although Woe has attracted the attention
...of America's finest critics, the matter of Melville's criticism,
...was never more not, rather than a good deal of it. The
...of the novel...
...I feel, both to the book itself and to criticism in
...general. The novel and the criticism are in a sense
...with a consciousness and a feeling which the American writer
...as a novel, Woe is an indispensable one for criticism
...The richness of the novel is clearly indicated
...This theme is an historical survey of the
...of the novel...
...is the best in American criticism of every kind of
...this is the responsibility of every reader of

Moby-Dick. And I believe that Moby-Dick is a book with many meanings for different people.

All of my references to Moby-Dick are to the admirable and scholarly edition (1947) of Willard Thorp, which is based on the first American edition.

I would like to thank Professors Clarence Gohdes, Jay B. Hubbell, Floyd Stovall, and William Braswell for their valuable supervision of the writing of this thesis. I would also like to express my thanks to the staff of the Duke University Library and to the staff of the Periodical Room in the Library of the University of North Carolina.

D. F.

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AMERICAN CRITICISM OF

HERMAN MELVILLE'S

MOBY-DICK

1935-1950

Chapter I

CRITICISM APPEARING IN BOOKS ON MOBY-DICK

SYMBOLISM

Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory--the world? Then we pygmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended.¹

Herman Melville

The present critical popularity of Herman Melville derives to some extent from the masterful symbolism in Moby-Dick. The twentieth century, which is peculiarly sensitive to the symbol, has adopted Melville as avant-garde. His ambiguous use of the symbol is typical, perhaps, of the writing of our age, yet the symbol itself is hardly modern in the history of literature.

¹ Willard Thorp, Herman Melville: Representative Selections . . . (New York, 1938), p. 394. This quotation is from a letter to Hawthorne dated November, 1851, after the publication of Moby-Dick.

The Romantics employed symbols; Shakespeare and Chaucer were not without symbolism; and one of Melville's greatest sources, the Bible, often abounds in symbols. Hawthorne, Poe, and Emerson, among his contemporaries, handled the symbol with far less ambiguity than did Melville. This, perhaps, accounts for the fact that their popularity preceded his. For, although Melville has always had an audience, it has been the twentieth century that ultimately afforded him the attention he deserves as a symbolic writer.

The predilection of the modern age for the symbol in literary expression has led, in the ambiguous symbolism of Melville, to some abuse in critical interpretation. It has also led to a perplexing mass of controversial readings and opinions of Moby-Dick. It is a curious paradox that one of America's greatest Romantic writers should enjoy a spurt of popularity during the lifetime of the younger symbolists of American literature whose purposes are entirely divergent from those of Melville. But the symbol is constant in the history of literature for precisely the same reasons that Melville employed it: it gives double meaning to the tale, it provides an ambiguous depth into which the reader may pour his own interpretation, and finally because with certain subject matters, the symbol is a necessary tool. In Melville's case his particular talent demanded symbolism for communication of his theme: the ultimate meaning of existence.

The many modern readings of the symbolism in Moby-Dick are widely divergent, but this is not strange, since what little

The following are the main points of the author's argument:

1. The author is not a relativist; and one of his main aims is to show

that the relativist's position is untenable. He argues that

the relativist's position is untenable because it leads to a

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evidence we have of Melville's own opinion of his symbolism seems to support varied critical interpretations. After the publication of Moby-Dick in 1851, Melville wrote to Mrs. Hawthorne, in part:

It really amazed me that you should find any satisfaction in that book. It is true that some men have said they were pleased with it, but you are the only woman. But, then, since you, with your spiritualizing nature, see more things than other people, and by the same process, define all you see, so that they are not the same things that other people see, but things, which while you think you but humbly discover them, you do in fact create them for yourself,--therefore, upon the whole, I do not so much marvel at your expressions concerning Moby Dick. At any rate, your allusions for example to the "Spirit Spout" first showed to me that there was a subtle significance in that thing --but I did not, in that case, mean it. I had some vague idea while writing it that the whole book was susceptible to an allegorical construction, and also that parts of it were--but the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories were first revealed to me after reading Mr. Hawthorne's letter which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-and-parcel allegoricalness of the whole.²

So Hawthorne, then, may be considered the first "new critic" to read meanings into Moby-Dick. This letter is important, for it demonstrates Melville's willingness to accept interpretations of which he admits he was unaware while writing the book. In a sense, this letter justifies the many modern readings of Moby-Dick.

2

Published, in part, in the International Book Review for December, 1924, and in the sales catalogue of the American Art Association, New York, 1931, sales number 3911.

There is little agreement among critics as to the meaning of Melville's symbols. Those points at which the critics are in accord are, usually, those points at which Melville abolishes all ambiguity and states his symbol with utter clarity. For an interpretation of the more difficult symbols, however, it has long been clear that no single reading of Moby-Dick will ever be completely satisfying. It has been said that this profuse critical disagreement is indicative of Melville's genius, and some critics have, for this reason, taken Melville's symbolism as a point of departure for declaring Moby-Dick the apotheosis of Melville's life's work--an epic! Despite the disagreement, few critics have declared Melville's work defective on the ground of a lack of clarity in his symbols.

Whatever may be the reader's personal reading of Melville's symbolism, some interpretation is necessary for a fundamental understanding of Moby-Dick. The recent critics have had more to say about symbolism in Moby-Dick than have any other of Melville's readers. Indeed, the flood of literary criticism of Moby-Dick grows year by year. All these differing interpretations are valuable in understanding a work that may be comprehended on many levels, and in many ways.

Of the general interpretations of Moby-Dick's symbolism, one of the most brilliant and generally accepted is that of F. O. Matthiessen. The symbol, to Matthiessen, was too much exploited by Melville in his later books, Pierre and The Confidence Man. In Moby-Dick Melville employed the symbol as

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a bridge between realistic reporting and allegory.³ In Matthiessen's opinion only Billy Budd and Benito Cereno among Melville's works also achieve this perfect symbolic blend. It is only in these works that the symbol expressed Melville's tragic dilemma of soul.

Most of Melville's symbols are an attempt, Matthiessen states, to grasp what Melville himself called "the ungraspable phantom of life."⁴ The land is a symbol for an ordered, restrained life; the sea is the unrestrained, evil power of nature. But it is also the place where man may best come to grips with the universe in which he lives.⁵

For an example Matthiessen cites the chapter "The Try-Works" in which he feels that Melville was attempting to capture the "phantom" of the American era in which he lived. The fire of the try-works (which to Matthiessen symbolizes Ahab's whole era of development) so disconcerts Ishmael, who is stationed at the boat's tiller, that he states "whatever swift rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern."⁶ Ishmael's statement, Matthiessen believes, is a prophecy of American disaster.

³ F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 286.

⁴ Moby-Dick, p. 5.

⁵ Matthiessen, pp. 287-288.

⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 5.

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Matthiessen interprets the whale symbol as a union of opposites.⁷ Just as white is the religious color, so is there terror at the base of religion and nature. Just as nature is thrilling with beauty, so does it also contain creatures like Moby Dick. Evil and white, then, may be equated just as good and white may be equated. The whale becomes a powerful symbol because it points out a paradox true to life. The whale becomes a symbol of evil for all the crew, save Ishmael. It is an objectification of all their dissatisfaction with life.⁸

Matthiessen directs a great deal of attention to Ahab as a symbol of the greatness of the American nation. Ahab has humanity (symbolized by his relationships with Pip, Starbuck, and his wife), but he also has a ruthless will-to-power (symbolized by Fedallah and his companions). Ahab becomes a symbol for the isolation that results from the will to power. He is de-humanized.⁹ His tortured soul is thus a cleavage between intellect and humanity. He throws away his quadrant in a frenzy to leave normal humanity behind him. (Matthiessen comments that he believes Ahab's sense of the evil of God is a symbolic act for Melville, who once entertained the same belief).

Ahab's greatest test comes when the evil of his intellectual strength unites him with the evil wreaked upon Pip in his

⁷ Matthiessen, pp. 287-288.

⁸ Ibid., p. 440.

⁹ Ibid., p. 448.

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intellectual weakness. But Ahab overcomes this bond with his transcendent intellect. Indeed, he must if he is to remain a constant symbol.

In conclusion, Matthiessen joins the ranks of those critics who feel that Melville's genius was, in part, subconscious. "Responsive to the shaping forces of his age as only men of passionate imagination are, even Melville can hardly have been fully aware of how symbolical an American hero he had fashioned in Ahab."¹⁰ Ahab is typical of the Presbyterian revolt: he denies Transcendentalism and Original Sin and can accept no orthodoxy. Matthiessen concludes that "Melville created in Ahab's tragedy a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is a part."¹¹

William Sedgwick also deals primarily with the large symbols in Moby-Dick, and his impressions of those symbols have had a lasting effect on Melville criticism. He sets up three central symbols needed for an understanding of Moby-Dick: Ahab, the whale, and the sea in contrast to the land. "Ahab is more than a whaling captain; he is man. He is man sentient, speculative, purposive, religious, standing his full stature against the immense mystery of creation."¹² It is apparent from this

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 458.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 459.

¹² William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), p. 97.

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that Sedgwick takes the Promethean view of Ahab and, in this light, *Moby Dick* becomes the immense mystery of existence which Ahab, as a Promethean symbol, is opposed to.

Moby Dick stands for the mystery of creation which confronts and challenges the mind of man at the same time that it lies ambushed in the process of his own consciousness. He is significant of the massive inertia in things, and of the blind beauty and violence of nature--all that ignores or twists or betrays or otherwise does outrage to man's purpose.¹³

Sedgwick's third symbol is the sea which, he feels, symbolizes the element of truth in the world as we know it. Ahab and Ishmael both set to sea, by this token, for truth, albeit their motives are divergent. The sea "leads away from all definitions, all traditional sanctities, all securities."¹⁴ The sea, as a symbol of truth, is close to death--the great truth, the great untried. This, Sedgwick believes, is Melville's finest symbol. In contrast to it, land is a symbol of normality which does not seek the height of consciousness and therefore never touches the depths.¹⁵

Ahab's white scar, which runs down his dark face and neck and then disappears in his clothing, is one manifestation of a deep, pervading symbolism in *Moby-Dick*. To Sedgwick it is "an all-ramifying, dark-light antithesis in the symbolism of *Moby-Dick*."¹⁶ Antithesis abounds in *Moby-Dick*: for example, the land-sea antithesis.

¹³ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

The light principle is akin to fire in all its manifestations. Whiteness is man conscious of God. The dark principle is man's "instinctive subterranean being. It lies in that far region where consciousness does not trouble to define itself, where it is closer to blood than brain."¹⁷

Sedgwick's reading of Moby-Dick is, then, the Promethean view: Ahab is seeking the good in a world which is antithetical. Sedgwick follows his interpretation of the symbols through the entire action of the book, yet he admits that there is no one formula for interpreting all of Melville's symbolism:

On the level of story the White Whale is a whale, Ahab is a defined character, the sea is most certainly the sea. Wonderful as these creations are on the level of story, they are still more wonderful as symbols. They can be seen to line up and define themselves in a profound generalization about life. That is, they fall into an allegorical pattern, yet no statement as to their meaning can convey how vital, how meaningful these symbols are. Separately and in relation to each other they will not be held to any final definition or any fixed subject-object relationship. Ahab, the Whale, the sea, the light and the dark, they are all interrelated. Yet within their interrelationship they enjoy unlimited freedom of association.¹⁸

Another critic, William Braswell, agrees, in essence, with Sedgwick's interpretation. Braswell states that it was common for Melville to use the exploring of seas to symbolize the exploration of the mind for undiscovered truth. As an example he cites the following passage in which he believes the land represents empirical truth which must be shut out of the mind

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 134-135.

in order to indulge in "the introspective abstract reasoning, necessarily general, which discloses reality."¹⁹

Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God--so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than to be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land!²⁰

Yvor Winters also agrees on the land-sea symbolism in Moby-Dick. "The symbolism of Moby-Dick is based on the anti-thesis of the sea and the land: the land represents the known, the mastered in human experience; the sea, the half-known, the obscure region of instinct, uncritical feeling, danger, and terror."²¹

Another aspect of Melville's symbolism has been examined by Nathalia Wright, who deals primarily with Melville's biblical sources. A full understanding of Melville's biblical allusions heightens our understanding of the symbol itself, Miss Wright argues.

¹⁹ William Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought (Durham, N. C., 1943), p. 21.

²⁰ Moby-Dick, p. 100.

²¹ Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1948), p. 200. This collected edition contains Maule's Curse from which this quotation is taken.

It is Miss Wright's thesis that Melville was saturated with the Bible in his thinking and in his writing. Melville's allusions and symbolism drawn from the Bible were not studied, Miss Wright thinks, but rather assimilated. She believes that his allusions to the Bible were involuntary. "They came from him spontaneously, as idioms in his vocabulary, as patterns of his thought."²² To substantiate this she cites several examples from Melville's journal and from his letters.

From the difference between Christian doctrine and Christian behavior Melville drew sharp comparisons in Moby-Dick. Father Mapple's sermon is, perhaps, the best example of this in the book. But in this scene the symbolism is on the surface. Miss Wright has been more curious about the underlying biblical symbolism in Moby-Dick, and it is with this that her book primarily deals.

Melville's use of color symbolism is allusive to the Bible, Miss Wright claims. She mentions several white biblical objects which touch on the subject of immortality and are representative of the Deity: Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, the leper Naaman, the apparel of the twenty-four elders, the fleece of the Lamb, and the pale horse of Death.²³ Miss Wright builds up a case

²²

Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham, N. C., 1949), p. 8.

²³

Ibid., p. 31.

on these grounds for interpreting *Moby Dick* as a symbol of the Deity, rather than a symbol of evil.

She notes that the color green is used in contrast to white and that it seems to symbolize the humanities: "Oh grassy glades! oh, ever vernal endless landscapes on the soul; in ye, --though long parched by the dead drought of the earthly life, --in ye, men yet may roll, like young horses in new morning clover; and for some few fleeting moments, feel the cool dew of life immortal on them."²⁴ The Garden of Eden, which is always described as voluptuously verdant, may be Melville's allusion in this color symbolism. When Ahab dreams of home while in a rare nostalgic mood, he sees an outworn scythe lying in a field--rusting "amid greenness."²⁵

Miss Wright comments that the Zoroastrian fires are drawn with biblical touches reminiscent of the fiery pit, the burning bush, the fiery furnace, the pentecostal tongues, and the pillar of fire--all from the Bible. The corpusants have the biblical quality of fire: they burn without destroying. Even the whale undergoes fire; after being cut in pieces he is "condemned to the pots, and like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, his spermaceti, oil, and bone pass unscathed through the fire."²⁶

²⁴ Moby-Dick, pp. 458-459.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 503.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 399-400.

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But all Melville's borrowings from the Bible do not lead him to dogmatic statements on the truth of the nature of existence. Miss Wright finds that Melville's value as a symbolist employing the Bible is as an author who approximates the truth.

So all Melville's art and all the vast scene it reared are not ends in themselves but means to an end. All his borrowings and all his conjurings are but approximations. They are circumferences of the center, ceremonies around the mummy, antechambers to the throne room, husks about the kernel. Not truth itself is his culminating vision, but "cunning glimpses," "occasional flashings-forth," "short quick probings at the very axis of reality"; symbolic and fragmentary manifestations of the one absolute, which is in the last analysis inviolable.²⁷

Another type of criticism looks for specific symbolism in certain scenes and chapters in Moby-Dick. Howard P. Vincent, for example, has offered an interesting interpretation of ^{the} this chapter called "The Doubloon." In this chapter Ahab nails a gold piece to the mast and offers it as a reward to the first man who spots Moby Dick. Each man passes by the doubloon and sees a different image in it. Vincent believes that, in this respect, the gold-piece is akin to the images issuing from the witches' cauldron in Macbeth: both are interpreted by the hero as portents of what he wishes to happen. The doubloon becomes a mirror of every man's soul. (Ishmael, significantly, does not look at the coin as he consciously avoids spiritual participation

in Ahab's pursuit of the whale).²⁸

The coin, which pictures three mountains out of which ascend a tower, a flame, and a crowing cock, has a different meaning for each crew member. Starbuck, the Christian hero, does not see the mountains (heroic conquest) but only the dark valleys and the heavenly peaks which seem to him like the Trinity. Stubb reads the history of man in the coin, but in humorous, commonsense terms and with a very limited vision of the metaphysical depths of life.²⁹ Flask, of course, sees the coin as mere money. Fedallah bows before it, either because of the flame on it which he, as a Zoroastrian, worships, or because of its evil purpose as employed by Ahab. Pip, although mad, sees the coin with a sooth-sayer's discernment. He visions the coin, the crew, and the boat together at the bottom of the sea.³⁰ In conclusion Vincent adds: "The doubloon itself is an ambiguous symbol which stands for the most ambiguous of all symbols, Moby Dick himself, for he who wins the doubloon has won first sight of the White Whale. Fittingly, the ambiguous coin is the ironic prize of none other than Ahab himself."³¹

²⁸ Howard P. Vincent, The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick (Boston, 1949), p. 339.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 340.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 341.

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W. H. Auden has examined the symbolism in Moby-Dick in terms of Romanticism and the Romantic's use of the symbol. Auden divides the symbols of the novel into three classes: symbols of the sea and desert, the stone and the shell, and the character of Ishmael, which is in itself a Romantic symbol.³²

Auden shows that, for the Romantic, the sea was essentially the heart of life (as contrasted to the land which the Romantics symbolized by the desert). "To the Romantic . . . childhood is over, its island is astern, and there is no other. The only possible place of peace now lies under the waters."³³ The Romantic's inability to merge his identity with the masses is shown in Ishmael's soliloquy in Moby-Dick's first chapter: "It is a damp drizzly November in my soul;--I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet . . . it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off."³⁴ Auden points out that this emotion is, in Melville, in conflict with the spirit of Democracy. Such characters as the Carpenter in Moby-Dick reveal, Auden claims, Melville's fears of the worst aspects of Democracy. For the Carpenter symbolizes the mediocrity that a

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W. H. Auden, The Enchafed Flood or The Romantic Iconography (New York, 1950), p. 24.

³³

Ibid., p. 25.

³⁴

Moby-Dick, p. 3.

Democracy can develop: he is a mere cog in the machinery of life. He has no existence outside of his work.

Thus, it is the sea which becomes for the Romantic the symbol of all that is wanting on land. These contrasting symbols lead us to another set of contrasting symbols, the stone and the shell. Auden borrows these symbols from Wordsworth's Prelude, but they are, he maintains, applicable to Moby-Dick. The stone is a symbol of the meaning of life offered by land, and the shell is a similar symbol for the sea. Melville clearly preferred the heroic and often destructive lessons of the sea (or, as Auden calls it, the symbol of the shell). For example, when the savage, Tashtego, falls into the cistern of the sperm-whale and is nearly drowned, Melville sets up an ironic contrast with the dangers of land life by having Ishmael remark: "How many, think ye, have likewise fallen into Plato's honey head, and sweetly perished there?"³⁵

Auden believes that the value of the symbolism in Moby-Dick is that "it takes a particular way of life, that of whale-fishing, which men actually lead to earn their livelihood and of which Melville had first-hand experience and makes it a case of any man's life in general."³⁶ As an example of this type of symbolism Auden examines, in detail, the nine ships that the Pequod encounters on its voyage. These ships are, Auden tells us,

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Moby-Dick, p. 324.

³⁶
Auden, p. 62.

... is a new one in the history of life.
... of his work.

... is the one which became for the people the
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... of another set of contrasting elements, the stone and the
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... and first-hand experience and makes it a case of ...

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"types of the relation of human individuals and societies in the tragic mystery of existence."³⁷

The Goney

The aged who may have experienced the mystery but cannot tell others. (The captain's trumpet symbolically falls into the sea).

The Town-Ho

Those who have knowledge of the mystery but keep it secret. (No one tells Ahab the story of Radney and Steerkilt).

The Jeroboam

Those who make a superstitious idolatry of the mystery or whom the mystery has driven crazy.

The Jungfrau and
the Rosebud

Those who out of sloth and avarice respectively will never become aware of the mystery.

The Enderby

Those who are aware of the mystery but face it with rational common sense and stoicism.

The Bachelor

The frivolous and fortunate who deny the existence of the mystery.

The Rachel

Those who have without their understanding or choice become involved in the mystery as the innocents massacred by Herod were involved in the birth of Christ.

The Delight

Those whose encounter with the mystery has turned their joy into sorrow.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁸ Auden, pp. 63-64.

Thus, the central symbol of the sea is a fluctuating one. The white whale, by the same terms, is also a fluctuating symbol. Moby Dick holds a different meaning for each character, just as each boat interprets the symbol of the shell differently.³⁹ The wind in Moby-Dick, like other of the natural elements, becomes a symbol of the shell, or rather the voice of the sea shell. The wind in the typhoon scene clearly offers a meaning to the life of two characters, Starbuck and Ahab.⁴⁰

A Reading of Moby-Dick, by M. O. Percival,⁴¹ is a rewarding impressionistic interpretation of the symbols. Percival is modest and cautious in his assertions and constantly allows for a difference of opinion. To him, Ahab is seeking an answer to existence with a preconceived notion of what that answer will be. Ahab seeks actual knowledge to support his conviction that the creator is a being who is ambivalent between good and evil.⁴² The whole action of the book is Ahab's steeling himself for this inhuman quest. To Percival, this occurs during the typhoon scene which he regards as Ahab's intellectual maturation of thought in his pursuit of Moby Dick.⁴³ Ahab's Zoroastrian

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Ibid., p. 65.

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Ibid., p. 80. Cf. Sumner Scott, "Some Implications of the Typhoon Scenes in Moby-Dick," American Literature, XII (March, 1940), 94. This article is discussed briefly in chapter two of this thesis.

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M. O. Percival, A Reading of Moby-Dick (Chicago, 1950).

42

Ibid., p. 50.

43

Ibid., p. 89.

worship of fire as the primal creator is here consummated. The ensuing action is merely a dramatization of Ahab's intellectual decision.

The symbolism in the typhoon scene is, according to Percival, Melville's finest achievement. The fiery corpusants, which the sailors look on as "God's burning finger,"⁴⁴ are, to Ahab, the primal creator. He realizes at this point his religious position:

I know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me.⁴⁵

Ahab is then seen in three symbolic flashes of light cast from the corpusants. In the first flash the harpooners (whom Percival reads as symbols of Ahab's emotions) are highlighted; then the Zoroastrian Parsee, in contrast to Ahab's angry passions, is highlighted (Percival sees the Parsee as symbolic of Ahab's mind and intellectual state); finally Ahab himself is lighted by the corpusants, completing the trinity of the flames as a figure embracing the dichotomy of angry passions and cold intellect.⁴⁶

Percival's book is not without an elaborate account of the symbolism involved in Ahab's relationship with other members

⁴⁴ Moby-Dick, p. 470.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 471.

⁴⁶ Percival, p. 91.

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of his crew. Ahab's demoniac will easily subdues the harpooners and works them into a frenzy that symbolizes, to Percival, Ahab's angry passions. The mates, representing varying degrees of intellect, decline the task and quail at, rather than succumb to, Ahab's will.⁴⁷ Percival feels that Starbuck has been misinterpreted by those critics who feel that he symbolizes the humanities. If such a symbol exists in Moby-Dick, Percival suggests that Pip in his madness would be it.⁴⁸ The Parsee is a self-created Mephistopheles--oriental, silent, passionless, and fatalistic. The Parsee and the four shadowy figures that accompany him are inner symbols of Ahab's mind. They are not emblems of the passions of Ahab, as are the harpooners, but rather they are a diseased projection, symbolical of the primal emotion in Ahab's mind.

When the tenor of Ahab's life quickens into drama, the Parsee is almost certain to be there, a silent participant. When death is near, the Parsee goes first, as Ahab's pilot. Thus the seducing reason, the Spectre, the Mephistopheles, who piloted Ahab into his course and determined its direction, pilots him out of it.⁴⁹

Ishmael is associated closely with the aims of Ahab in Percival's reading. Both men seek an ultimate truth about nature that comes to terms with nature's evil as well as good. Ishmael escapes because he is far more passive than Ahab in his pursuit of this truth.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

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Percival believes Moby Dick to be a symbol of the presence of evil in the world.⁵¹ He cites as evidence this passage:

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and oakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visible personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.⁵²

Thus Moby Dick is to Ahab the ancient symbolic scapegoat. Upon the head of Moby Dick ^{are} placed symbolically the sins of the world. Percival thinks that it is Ahab's concept that Moby Dick is a scapegoat without the innocence and sanctification that, by custom, attended the ancient ritual of the scapegoat's slaughter.⁵³

On yet another level, Moby Dick is a symbol of inherent good and evil, the paradoxical and ultimate union in Ahab's vision of life.⁵⁴ Percival links Melville's symbolism to its modern critical appreciation with judgment of rare acumen:

Here now, in a superlative degree, is an image of the kind beloved by contemporary poets, one expressing a whole complex of thought and emotion and fusing, in this instance, a variety of opposites, such as beauty and desolation, holiness and demonism, what is of good report and what of bad--more simply, good and evil.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵² Moby-Dick, p. 173.

⁵³ Percival, p. 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

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He adds that for some readers Moby Dick is a symbol of the deceptive world of the senses, uniting moral contraries in the world of ultimate reality. There is a dual symbolism in that Ahab sinks with the whale and the sky hawk is dragged down by the Pequod. Thus, Melville leaves the problem of life unresolved, and his symbols are united, even in death.⁵⁶

W. S. Gleim and Richard Chase may also be considered impressionistic critics. They differ from M. O. Percival in the degree of dogmatism with which they make their assertions. W. S. Gleim is a critic who reads symbolism into almost every sentence of Moby-Dick. He believes that the book has a sustained system of symbolism through which its full meaning may be comprehended. He allows for two types of symbols: those that the author declares as symbols, or "material" symbols, and "hidden" symbols which the author intended to be discovered by the reader.⁵⁷

It is with these hidden symbols that Gleim concerns himself. Gleim's vast cataloguing of symbols with their adjacent specific meanings seems, at times, absurd. Yet, on occasion Gleim produces an original and valuable insight into Melville's symbolism that makes the reader regret that his volume is so diffuse and dogmatic in its treatment of the subject. Gleim's

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Ibid., p. 119.

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W. S. Gleim, The Meaning of Moby-Dick (New York, 1938), p. 4.

great error is that he sees Melville as an esoteric symbolist: "Although Melville hinted frequently, that the reader should read between the lines, he guarded against any possible transparency in his design. . . . All of the . . . evasion, however, is merely a stroke of finesse, intended to divert the reader from the trail."⁵⁸ It is inconceivable to believe today that Melville wanted anything but to be understood and to communicate to his readers. Gleim has confused Melville with the later French symbolists of modern times.

Gleim does a good job of pointing out the objects that Melville obviously intended to be taken as symbols: the trumpet dropped into the sea by the captain of the Albatross; the shoals of fish that swim away from the Pequod;⁵⁹ the giant squid ("Few whale-ships ever beheld, and returned to their ports to tell of it");⁶⁰ Ahab's pipe thrown overboard; and the white color of the whale, Moby Dick.⁶¹

Gleim is one of the few critics who believe Moby-Dick may be read as a sustained allegory. He suggests that the reader substitute the word "fate" for "Moby Dick" to discover for himself the allegorical interpretations.⁶² He supports this conviction with several quotations lifted out of context.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁵⁹ Moby-Dick, p. 223.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 263.

⁶¹ Gleim, pp. 21-23.

⁶² Ibid., p. 40.

Gleim's more specific cataloguing of "hidden" symbols in Moby-Dick is exhausting and naive. Gleim has, however, revealed the possibilities in a personal reading of Moby-Dick. Undoubtedly his findings are extremely rewarding and meaningful to him. But any close and rational examination of the plot shows that the allegory is, in the main, far more accidental and incomplete than Gleim believes. Gleim is something of an Ahab among critics, trying to harpoon the meaning of Moby-Dick once and for all time. In a different (and more intelligent) sense the same may be said of Richard Chase. But it has become increasingly evident, I believe, that this type of criticism will never be successful with Moby-Dick.

Richard Chase reads all of Melville's novels in terms of symbols. He discards the commonly held opinion that Mardi was the literary precursor of Moby-Dick. He dismisses Mardi as "facetious fancy" and points to Typee as employing the fundamentals of Melville's mature symbolic art.⁶³

Chase is extremely lucid in labeling Melville's symbols in Moby-Dick. For example, he declares that Moby Dick is God incarnate in the whale.⁶⁴ He then proceeds to establish his case. Moby Dick represents the inscrutable secrecy and profound wisdom of God. But Moby Dick is also a machine, for Melville's conception of God is of an all-powerful machine that runs out

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Richard Chase, Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York, 1949), p. 42.

⁶⁴

Ibid., p. 49.

of human control. Chase points out that Ahab must, in order to attempt to conquer Moby Dick, turn into a human machine bent on one purpose.

The whiteness of the whale seems to support Chase's theory. He points out that Zeus made himself incarnate in a snowy-white bull, and that the Ancient Mariner's albatross and other sacrificial animals have been held in awe for their whiteness. Chase's analysis of the aesthetic use of white in Moby-Dick is intriguing:

As we watch the whale swimming over the surface of the Pacific, we feel aesthetic intuitions of the beauty of God. In the calm of aesthetic contemplation, the terrifying whiteness of the whale is broken into the rainbow of its component colors and we see the inward reality revealed objectively by the aesthetic intuition. But when the terror of the whale rushes upon us, the revelations of conscious art will again be obscured, the rainbow which art has shown us will be swallowed up in the massive whiteness, art will collapse into nature, and God will descend into the mechanical brute to renew His war against man.⁶⁵

No less interesting is Chase's reading of Ahab, whom he sees as a symbol operating on three different levels: (1) as a typical American, (2) as Prometheus, and (3) as Christ.⁶⁶ Above all, Ahab is "the American cultural image: the captain of industry and of his soul; the exploiter of nature who severs his own attachment to nature and exploits himself out of existence; the good progressive American."⁶⁷ Chase interprets

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 42-44.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

Melville's works as testaments to the so-called "new liberalism" and Ahab, in this light, is an American headed for an industrial and not a spiritual collapse. Ahab's symbolic antithesis is the sailor, Bulkington. Chase finds in Bulkington a democratic hero, the other side of the coin to Ahab. Both Bulkington and Ahab seek the independence of the sea, but for different purposes. Bulkington is the true Promethean hero and therefore Melville can only introduce him and then drop him from the narrative, for he alone could successfully combat Ahab. For this reason, Chase points out, Melville buries him early in the book in a chapter called "The Lee Shore":

But as in landlessness alone resides the rightest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God--so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing --straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!⁶⁸

Of the other characters in Moby-Dick who are symbolically opposed to Ahab only Starbuck and Pip, Chase feels, ever gain the ascendancy over Ahab.⁶⁹ Starbuck has his moment during the chapter called "The Symphony," but it is short-lived. Pip controls Ahab, with limitations, toward the end of the book. Both characters, however, eventually prove ineffectual in

⁶⁸ Moby-Dick, p. 100.

⁶⁹ Chase, p. 55.

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dealing with a man turned into a machine.

Other Chase interpretations of Melville symbols are less convincing. Chase acknowledges, for example, that the various boats that pass the Pequod are all symbolic warnings to Ahab, on one level of meaning. On another level, they represent America sailing off evasively toward an archaic utopia, or a futuristic utopia.⁷⁰

Chase finds the conclusion of the book with the sinking of the Pequod symbolic of the smash-up of the American world. All the different tribes on board are ultimately conquered by death. Ishmael alone survives because he is a lost American, uncommitted to any of the symbolically American action of the ship and crew.⁷¹

This last interpretation is an example of pushing symbolism beyond Melville's intention. Like many "new critics" Chase feels that the artist is often unaware of his accomplishments and that it is the duty of the critic to point out to the public these subconscious symbols. The importance of Richard Chase is that his reading of Moby-Dick is an example of what the book may come to mean in an internal and personal interpretation of the symbolism. His book is perhaps the best argument for interpreting Moby-Dick as myth capable of variable readings.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 63.

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A new and refreshingly different note has been struck in Melville criticism with the recent work of Newton Arvin. It is Arvin's belief that there is absolutely no allegory in Moby-Dick. Nor is there, by his interpretation, any symbolism that is imposed upon the meaning from outside the subject matter. Instead, Moby-Dick is a fable whose symbols (land, sea, the whale) flower naturally and are always believable on a naturalistic level of interpretation.⁷² Yet they are much more than mere flowerings of naturalism:

Its [Moby-Dick's] leading images are symbols in the strict sense, not allegorical devices or emblems; symbols in the sense that their primal origins are in the unconscious, however consciously they have been organized and controlled; that on this account they transcend the personal and local and become archetypal in their range and depth; that they are inexplicit, polysenantic and never quite exhaustible in their meanings.⁷³

Arvin believes that the great power of the whale symbol is that the more it is treated realistically, the more powerful it becomes as a believable symbol. As the meanings accumulate on the whale symbol, so does the cetology pile up to make it believable on a realistic level.

Arvin believes that the water is a "complex and iridescent" symbol of death, and it is for this reason that Ishmael's

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Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 153.

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Ibid., p. 167.

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signing on the Pequod is a temporary passage out of existence. Friendship saves Ishmael from death by establishing his ties again with the human race (symbolically represented by Queequeg's coffin floating Ishmael to safety).⁷⁴

It is perhaps too soon to tell if Newton Arvin's criticism marks a new trend in reading Moby-Dick. The critical popularity of the novel seems to be inexhaustible. Along with the excitement of the critics over Moby-Dick has come a certain amount of inane criticism. Fortunately, Moby-Dick seems impervious to bad criticism. It has endured and will continue to endure despite the critical disagreement over its meaning and symbolism. This is not to say that this criticism has been ineffectual in revealing new values of the book to the public. Despite their disagreement, these critics have stirred up rich meanings in a book that seems a never-ending source of symbolic material.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 171.

MEANING

I have written a wicked
book, and feel spotless as
the lamb.¹

Herman Melville

The interpretations of the meaning of Melville's Moby-Dick are as numerous as the interpretations of the symbolism and, indeed, are difficult to separate from the symbolism. Generally speaking, the interpretations would seem to fall into three classes: the philosophical, the religious, and the Democratic meanings. It is perhaps here that criticism has scored its greatest success with Moby-Dick. Divergent as the interpretations of meaning are, Moby-Dick seems to be able to support most of them. They are rarely contradictory and often seem to overlap and accumulate into a statement of deep import.

Melville's philosophical meaning, according to F. O. Matthiessen, is similar to that of Theodore Dreiser: that the universe possesses terrifying indifference to man's pursuits and goals. In short, Melville was affirming Manichaeism in Moby-Dick.² Matthiessen points out that Melville continually states ambivalent meanings. For example, we cannot assume that the whale equals evil and that man equals good, for the

¹ Willard Thorp, Herman Melville: Representative Selections . . . (New York, 1938), p. 394. This quotation is from a letter to Hawthorne dated November, 1851.

² F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 44.

cancerous whale is a sympathetic figure, and Flask, in his malicious torture of it, is not.³ Melville seems to have been aware that he was dealing with the primitive drives of human beings that are far beyond the scope of the intellect.

The meaning of Moby-Dick is close to that of Zoroastrianism, Matthiessen believes. The character of Fedallah the Parsee, or sun-worshipper, links the book with the earth's primal generation,--the Zoroastrians. According to their philosophy, the world emanated from Ormazd, a spirit of light and fire, who wills the good. But during the temporal epoch he is not free but struggling with his evil brother, Ahriman. "Zoroaster stresses the ultimate triumph of the good spirit, but the history of these brothers' conflict is the history of the world."⁴ To Matthiessen this, then, is the meaning of Moby Dick: the world is composed of alternate good and evil. Rebellion to this order of things is as useless as devotion. The devoted Starbuck and the rebellious Ahab are both annihilated.⁵

William Ellery Sedgwick is in agreement with Matthiessen on the central meaning of Moby-Dick. He believes that Melville

³ Ibid., p. 437.

⁴ Ibid., p. 439.

⁵ Ibid., p. 459. Matthiessen adds that Melville shows through Ahab what the Emersonian will to good can become in people of less virtue, but equal resoluteness and intellectual vigor.

was concerned with the truth--both the glories and the terrors of life. Melville's central meaning is that man must not fight the mystery of existence. Central to this meaning, Sedgwick points out, is the character of Ishmael. He is a foil to Ahab. Where Ahab and the rest of the crew make a choice in an interpretation of life, Ishmael is almost unborn, philosophically speaking, in his curiously ambivalent interpretation of life: "I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country."⁶ Or, as Sedgwick puts it in cetological terms: "Ahab is a fast-fish. The Universe has got its barb in him. His humanity is transfixed. Ishmael on the contrary is a loose-fish. Will he keep so? Or will he like Ahab impale himself on the exasperating inscrutability of things?"⁷ By Sedgwick's definition Ishmael's salvation by accepting life unquestioningly is Moby-Dick's meaning.

Another critic, Stanley Geist, finds the meaning of Moby-Dick centered in Ahab's revolt against evil. Geist believes that Ahab is a projection of Melville. Tragic heroism is the

⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 391.

⁷ William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), p. 120.

substance of Moby-Dick; Ahab has arrived at the tragic view of life and heroically pitches himself against evil as represented by Moby Dick. Geist assumes that in the mere writing of the book Melville is in accord with Ahab. Man's coming of age and the meaning of Moby-Dick is, then, an awareness of the tragic view of life. There can be no reconciliation between the forces of good and evil, by this definition, but only a heroic struggle with immanent defeat.⁸ Geist concludes:

It is obvious, then that any interpretation of Moby-Dick which represents the book as a metaphysical drama, or as a systematized scheme in which every character and every incident is carefully integrated in a pattern of thought, becomes absurd. Such a mode of apprehending life or of presenting life was repulsive to Melville: any attempt to reduce life to a set of abstractions, or to impose an ordered system upon an irrational universe, was both presumptuous and heartless.⁹

Ahab is the true Melville hero; he recognizes life's darkest side and heroically defies it. His defiance lasts until death. Tragic heroism is, then, Melville's subject rather than any sustained allegory or symbolism of metaphysics.¹⁰

Willard Thorp has admitted that the reader of Moby-Dick may read into the novel anything that he pleases. It may be the Romantic's pursuit of death; it may be merely a thrilling sea story that also presents a definitive account of America's

⁸ Stanley Geist, Herman Melville: The Tragic Vision and The Heroic Ideal (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), p. 23.

⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

great industry of the 1840's; or it may record the clash of transcendental optimism with "the new realistic perception of the natural world."¹¹

However, Thorp points out the difference in central meaning between Moby-Dick and its spiritual predecessor of Melville's novels, Mardi. The pursuit of the mystery of life, Yillah, in Mardi was a quest for happiness and earthly felicity. In Moby-Dick Melville has transformed the meaning into a pursuit of an inscrutable foe for revenge.¹²

Thorp's own interpretation (although he constantly allows for many other views of the book's meaning) is that Melville split his personality into two of his characters. Thorp calls them Ishmael-Melville and Ahab-Melville. Melville can, through Ahab-Melville, question the universe with an angry fist; yet he can at the same time, as Ishmael-Melville, make no philosophical choice and escape disaster.¹³ Thorp believes Melville had this in mind when he wrote Hawthorne, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."¹⁴

W. H. Auden has examined the religious meaning in Moby-Dick and found it centered in Father Mapple's sermon, which occurs early in the novel. The parable of Jonah which Father Mapple

¹¹ Thorp, p. lxix.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. lxxii.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 394.

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preaches poses a problem that every member of the Pequod's crew is faced with, consciously or unconsciously. Jonah has known the word of God. But Jonah, out of fear and pride, flees the work of God. His refusal is met with the classic storm and the whale. In the whale's belly Jonah is deprived of even that one gift he had: his ability to hear the Word of God. "Humbled, he does not despair but repents and trusts in the God whom he can no longer hear. God forgives him, he is cast up on the land, and sets off to fulfill his vocation."¹⁵

Auden points out that Father Mapple's moral is contradictory:

- 1) If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying of ourselves, wherein the hardship of obeying God consists.
- 2) Delight is to him--a far, far upward and inward delight--who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth ever stands forth his own inexorable self.¹⁶

Father Mapple's sermon is the old Christian paradox that a man must die to be born again; in losing himself he gains himself. The problem is the reconciliation of the ego with the infinite. Auden believes that Queequeg and Ishmael are the only two members of the crew who come near fulfilling Father Mapple's moral. Ishmael alone survives because Queequeg had not a

¹⁵ W. H. Auden, The Enchafed Flood or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea (New York, 1950), p. 119.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

conscious will toward this moral; he arrived at it unconsciously. Ishmael alone heard out Father Mapple's sermon, and Ishmael alone survived the wreck of the Pequod. Auden believes that Ishmael's discovery of the Christian paradox in Father Mapple's sermon and his effort to live by that paradox is the central meaning of Moby-Dick.

One of the finest Melville scholars, Howard P. Vincent, is in complete agreement with W. H. Auden about the religious meaning of Moby-Dick. He prefaces his remarks, however, with a brilliant statement of the novel's many meanings:

Moby-Dick brings into magnificent focus the emergent forces of the western world. Moby-Dick, so complex as to be many things to many men, has been interpreted as a satire of nineteenth-century finance capitalism, as a vast nature myth like Beowulf, as an allegory of Man's search for Paradise--or simply as a narrative of the sea and nothing more. To these and other interpretations it may be further added that Moby-Dick is a satire of New England Transcendentalism, a criticism of American social and ethical thought, a condemnation of brutalizing materialism, and an affirmation of the dignity and nobility of Man. Moby-Dick is all of these, and none exclusively, for in stressing any one part we neglect others--such the penalty of partial analysis. A psychological penetration into the American spirit, Moby-Dick is at once the expression of all the thoughts and feelings of 1851 America put into a vigorous, sweeping style well fitted to the subject and the time: violent, exaggerated, and, if at times bathetic, more often soaring into a lyric loveliness and passion previously, and since, unknown in American prose.¹⁷

Although Vincent believes, with Auden, that Father Mapple's sermon is the central meaning of the book, he puts forward

a theory that Moby-Dick is also an attack on the Transcendental viewpoint. Melville's antipathy toward the Transcendentalists is well known,¹⁸ but Melville admired the Pantheistic viewpoint even if he could not escape it. Vincent states that Melville's attack on Emerson and the other Transcendentalists occurs in the chapter titled "The Mast-Head":

The paragraphs descriptive of the dreamer in "The Mast-Head" may well bear the weight of another interpretation: that they here constitute an implicit satire of the unitarian point of view, especially as manifest in the Transcendental philosophy of the Over-Soul. Melville seems to say that transcendental harmony, in which the personal identity is lost in infinity, is deceptively seductive. It is unable to account for the evil and repellent facts of life; in other words, the shark swimming in the sea (the "uprising fin") may not be explained away glibly, Melville says, as "the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul."¹⁹

But the central meaning, Vincent believes, is the answer to the question, "Why does Ishmael survive?" Certainly it was not merely to tell the story, as that would be not only a cheap literary device, but unnecessary: much of Moby-Dick is told from the viewpoint of the author-omniscient. "Ishmael survives because he was not entirely of the Pequod, either literally or symbolically."²⁰ Ishmael achieves a spiritual rebirth when he is saved from the vortex afloat in the coffin.

¹⁸ Cf. Thorp, pp. 389-393: Melville's letter to Hawthorne dated June, 1851.

¹⁹ Vincent, pp. 151-152.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 390.

Ishmael had set to sea angered at life, but he learned the law of aloneness and the law of companionship from Ahab and Starbuck respectively. He also learned what Vincent calls "the law of acceptance."²¹ Ishmael accepts what fate has in store for him and does not fight life as Ahab does. "Symbolically, it [Ishmael's salvation] exemplifies the paradox of Christian doctrine (and of other religions) that a man must lose his life to save it. . . . Moby-Dick has returned at last to the memorable message of Father Mapple."²²

William Braswell finds Moby-Dick's meaning a heretical view that was out of step with Melville's times and the affirmations of life offered by Carlyle, Emerson, and other transcendentalists. Braswell considers the major import to be an accusation of the Deity for the evil in the universe.²³ Ahab's heresy is similar to the heresy of Milton's Satan, with this difference: "Satan is a supernatural being who, though heroic, works by guile to achieve a selfish end. The all-too-human Ahab openly pits himself against a symbol of the divine power because he conceives God to have unjustly afflicted man."²⁴

²¹ Ibid., p. 390.

²² Ibid., p. 391.

²³ William Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought (Durham, N. C., 1943), p. 73.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

That the central meaning of Moby-Dick is a position of religious heresy is carried further by another critic, Geoffrey Stone. He believes that the central doctrine is Manich^{ae}anism.²⁵ Melville's single and central meaning is, Stone believes, his own attempt (through Ahab) "to insult and assail the God of his own belief by confronting Him as an equal."²⁶

Stone offers the new opinion that this attempt to "assail the God of his belief" is the only sustained message in Moby-Dick. "The general tendency has been to regard the work as a sort of Chinese carving in which one intricacy is contained within another, with hardly a sentence that will not reveal further and deeper meanings to patient inquiry. The truth seems to be that no great deal of painstaking artistry went into Moby-Dick."²⁷ Yet at the same time Stone acknowledges that "you cannot catch Leviathan with a hook, and no one theory will fully account for Moby-Dick."

Ralph Henry Gabriel considers Melville and Moby-Dick in the light of Melville's criticism of democracy. He points out that Melville was one of democracy's few critics during the age of its greatest expansion. Melville saw in America's progress precisely the same corruption that he viewed in the

²⁵ Geoffrey Stone, Melville (New York, 1949), p. 173.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 161.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 164-165.

exploitation of the Polynesian Islands he visited in the South Seas. Gabriel believes that for Melville the universe was a basically evil place. The individual must stand alone against it. Democracy held that the evil of life could be abolished through democratic methods, yet Melville realizes that this was a Utopian dream.²⁸ Gabriel believes that Melville thought that democracy was "a moment in history, not the end toward which all history runs."²⁹

On the narrative level this meaning is conveyed through Ahab. Ahab, representing man, fights evil without compromise and without respite. In the end Ahab saved his soul, Gabriel maintains, by preserving inviolate his personal integrity. Ahab goes down in unconquered defeat while Moby Dick swims on for other Ahabs to pursue. Gabriel believes that Ahab is the personification of individualism and the antithesis of democracy.³⁰ And Ahab, Gabriel insists, is the meaning of the book: Man must pursue truth, knowing that he can never find it, knowing that he lives in an inscrutable world.

Gabriel defends Melville from the charge of expounding pessimism by recalling the reader's attention to Father Mapple's last words: "Delight is to him--a far-far upward,

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Ralph Henry Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought; An Intellectual History Since 1815 (New York, 1940), p. 73.

²⁹

Ibid., p. 75.

³⁰

Ibid., p. 74.

and inward delight--who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self."³¹

Newton Arvin finds two meanings in Moby-Dick: the moral meaning and the mythic meaning. The moral meaning is akin to the fraternal and democratic meaning of Whitman.³² It is that no man is alone, has free will, or is independent of the doings of other men. Ishmael realizes this and survives. Arvin believes that Ahab does not realize this because his ego (not his intellect) isolates him. Arvin is of the opinion that Ahab is never given to "pure" thought but, on the contrary, is only too subject to his ego. He has the inflated arrogance of Prometheus, Agamemnon, and Oedipus.³³ It is Arvin's conclusion that the moral meaning of Moby-Dick is to abolish the ego, as Ishmael does, and to enter into a state of fraternal democracy.

Deeper than the moral meaning, however, is the mythic meaning, according to Arvin. He defines myth as an "imagined narrative in which the leading roles are played by divine or godlike personages, engaged in symbolic actions amid symbolic objects; which embodies some form of the conflict between human wishes and nonhuman forces, and which has its roots in

³¹
Moby-Dick, p. 40.

³²
Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 182.

³³
Ibid., p. 179.

a philosophically serious desire to comprehend the meaning of nature and the destiny of man."³⁴ Moby-Dick would seem to fulfill his definition: Ahab is king-like and the white whale is a "nonhuman force." In the mythic interpretation of Moby-Dick, the whale with his whiteness becomes symbolic not only of evil but of good, of the central ambiguity of existence. His whiteness is all colors. Thus, the whale with his moral ambivalency is suitable, by the mythic interpretation, for neither worship nor scorn. He can merely be accepted (as Ishmael accepts him) as a phenomenon. By this interpretation Moby-Dick may be described as a wicked book in that it is not Christian. But Melville was a "spotless" author in that he believed it to be the truth.

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Ibid., p. 183.

SOURCES AND INFLUENCES

In the writing of Moby-Dick Herman Melville utilized many sources. Some of his whaling sources Melville acknowledged in the footnotes in the actual text of the novel. The reader may gain some notion of Melville's research by reading the "Extracts" which precede Moby-Dick. But Melville's sources were many more than he acknowledged in the text. Critics and scholars agree that Moby-Dick contains a masterful assimilation of many writings. But, in tracing the literary influences and sources of Moby-Dick, the critics also agree that Melville was a genius at shaping and transfiguring his material for his own ends.

Howard P. Vincent's book, The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick,¹ is perhaps one of the most scholarly works yet to appear on Melville. Vincent, who traces Melville's sources for Moby-Dick, is not content with mere scholarship: "Sources are of secondary importance; the text itself must be primary in our attention. The fundamental meanings of a work of art may be learned by direct study of the work itself. Therefore, The Trying-Out does more than list source materials; it attempts to show Melville's artistic enrichment of mundane fact; and it moves

¹ Howard P. Vincent, The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick (Boston, 1949).

on further to suggest the universal meaning of Moby-Dick.²

Vincent begins by tracing Melville's early background for writing Moby-Dick. In his earlier novels Vincent points out that Melville had mastered the sea-romance type of fiction. He had also exhausted all his biographical material except his whaling days.³ Vincent believes that Moby-Dick saw its beginning in the review Melville wrote for Evert Duyckinck on J. Ross Browne's Etchings of a Whaling Cruise, with Notes of a Sojourn on the Island of Zanzibar. To Which is Appended a Brief History of the Whale Fishery: Its Past and Present Condition (New York, 1848). Melville's review reveals his excitement over the material and his knowledge of whaling.⁴

Vincent advances the speculation that Moby-Dick was actually two books. The first draft was a typical Melville sea story with octological material on the whaling industry liberally mixed in with it. As yet, Moby Dick had not entered as a character.⁵ This book, begun in February, 1850, was, according to Duyckinck's description, "mostly done" by August of that year.⁶ Between the summer of 1850 and its publication in 1851 the book was rewritten into Moby-Dick. Vincent believes that Hawthorne and Shakespeare were the two influences that caused this rewriting. From Hawthorne, whom Melville met at

² Ibid., p. 8.

³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

the history of the movement for the abolition of slavery in the United States. The first volume of the series, published in 1847, was entitled "The History of the American Anti-Slavery Movement, 1817-1847." This volume was written by William Lloyd Garrison, one of the most prominent abolitionists of the time. It was a comprehensive history of the movement, covering the period from the first abolition societies in the United States to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The book was a best-seller and played a major role in the abolitionist movement. It was followed by two more volumes, "The History of the American Anti-Slavery Movement, 1847-1850" and "The History of the American Anti-Slavery Movement, 1850-1854." These volumes also covered the period from the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act to the end of the Civil War. The series was a major contribution to the history of the abolitionist movement and is still a valuable resource for scholars and students of the period.

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this time, Melville gained a sense of evil. From Shakespeare, whom he read at this time, he gained a tragic vision of life.⁷

The source for the white whale, Moby Dick, is generally assumed to have been both the whale that sank the Essex and an actual white whale that frequented the Pacific between 1819 (by coincidence, the year of Melville's birth) and 1859.⁸

This white whale was called "Mocha Dick" and the record of its destruction in the Pacific is given by Vincent: "Fourteen stove boats, nineteen planted harpoons absorbed in his blubber, and the death of thirty men. Mocha Dick sank a lumber ship, a French merchantman and an Australian trader and stove in three whaleships so badly that they were almost lost."⁹

Vincent believes that Ahab, on the other hand, is largely an original creation on Melville's part. Vincent also mentions the sources for Ahab's two physical infirmities. One came from personal experience and the other from his reading. The famous Pittsfield elm tree near Melville's home furnished the source for Ahab's scar. The tree had been struck by lightning and was scarred with a long and ghastly mark which, over a period of years, killed the tree. One of Melville's Pittsfield friends cited this as his source.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁸ Ibid., p. 168.

⁹ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 111-112.

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The other infirmity--Ahab's amputated leg--may come from Beale's Natural History of the Sperm Whale, Vincent believes. Melville marked the passage of an amputation of an arm of one of the mates. He underlined the words "his best friend, his right arm."¹¹

With chapter 105 Melville concluded the cetological sections of Moby-Dick. From that chapter to the brilliant conclusion it might well be assumed that Melville was working without sources and solely with his imagination. But even this section, which Vincent calls the "narrative" conclusion since it is pure drama, is not without some sources. Vincent has found that William Scoresby, Jr.'s book, An Account of the Arctic Regions, supplied material for Perth's making of a special harpoon for Moby Dick.¹² The material for the description of the burning corposants may have come from several sources. Melville saw them himself on a voyage to Liverpool in 1849.¹³ Dana's Two Years Before the Mast, which Melville had read before starting Moby-Dick, features corposants in a spectacular scene. Two other books in Melville's possession that described corposants were Samuel Purchas's Hakluyt Posthumous or Purchas His Pilgrimes and Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. The latter book described corposants and both good and evil omens, and it is Vincent's belief that Melville used this as a source for employing the corposants as ambiguous symbols.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., p. 112.

¹² Ibid., p. 372.

¹³ Ibid., p. 376.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 379.

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Moby-Dick itself was, and is, an excellent source book on whaling. Even today, Vincent claims, it stands as an excellent introduction to the subject. The reason for this is undoubtedly that Melville took advantage not only of his own experience, but of the best whaling books available in his day: Beale, Bennett, Browne, and Cheever.¹⁵ These four authors did not comprise all of Melville's "fish documents," but they are the most important of Melville's sources for the chapters on cetology in Moby-Dick.¹⁶

Another critic, Charles Olson, has also made an extensive study of Melville's sources in writing Moby-Dick. The larger part of his work is a study of Melville's underlinings in the books in his library. Although Olson's work is written in an insanely modern style which is often difficult to understand, he nevertheless uncovers and presents more material in this field than has any other critic, Howard Vincent excepted.

Olson has collected all the pertinent facts of the sinking of the whale-ship Essex and presents ^{them} it in a manner that highlights the many parallels between that ill-fated ship and Melville's Pequod. Olson establishes the connection between fact and fiction by presenting Melville's comments on the Essex's wreck which he wrote in his own copy of Narrative of

¹⁵ Thomas Beale, Natural History of the Sperm Whale (New York, 1835); Frederick Debell Bennett, A Whaling Voyage Round the Globe, from the Year 1833 to 1836 (London, 1840); J. Ross Browne, Etchings of a Whaling Cruise (New York, 1846); Henry T. Cheever, The Whale and His Captors (New York, 1850).

¹⁶ Vincent, p. 124.

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the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex (New York, 1829), by Owen Chase, the first mate of the Essex. Melville, Olson tells us, had met Owen Chase's son when he was a young sailor and had received his copy of the Narrative from him. Olson reproduces several of Melville's comments in the margin of this volume: "The reading of this wondrous story upon the landless sea, & close to the very latitude of the shipwreck had a surprising effect upon me."¹⁷ This and other comments that Melville scattered about in his copy of the Narrative make a sound case, Olson believes, for taking Chase's book as an initial source for Moby-Dick. However, Olson is careful to point out that the Narrative was only an initial source. Many other and more important sources and influences were to enter into Moby-Dick's composition.¹⁸

The Faust legend (in its treatment by both Marlowe and Goethe) may be traced in Moby-Dick, according to Olson. There is, however, an important change in the fundamental characterization. Ahab, unlike the earlier Fausts, dies with an acceptance of his damnation and a resignation to his fate.¹⁹

¹⁷ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael (New York, 1947), p. 28.

¹⁸ Olson's theory of Shakespeare's influence on the writing of Moby-Dick looms large in Call Me Ishmael. However, this part of the book is merely a re-statement of an earlier Olson article, "Lear and Moby-Dick," which appeared in Twice A Year (Fall-Winter, 1938). This article is discussed in the periodical chapter of this thesis.

¹⁹ Olson, p. 59.

Olson's final suggestion for a Melville source is a nebulous one: that Melville, as a true American was an explorer and exploiter of unknown lands, that the main frontier in 1850 was the sea, and that "space" on the sea was Melville's underlying driving creative force.²⁰

F. O. Matthiessen finds four great influences on Melville in his writing of Moby-Dick: Hawthorne, Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Bible. He believes that the influence of Browne and the Bible are primarily on Melville's rhetoric. Matthiessen states that Melville read Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand" late in 1851 and may have used its characterization of the dehumanized man to draw Ahab in the final chapters of the chase in Moby-Dick.²¹

William Ellery Sedgwick also agrees with these influences and adds to them that of Dante's Divine Comedy. There is a difference however which Sedgwick discusses: in the Divine Comedy the vision focuses ultimately on the will of God in his creation; in Moby-Dick the vision focuses on the mystery of creation, rather than on the creator.²²

Newton Arvin believes that Melville found creative nourishment during the composition of Moby-Dick not only in his whaling

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 11-15.

²¹ F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Emancipation in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 449.

²² William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), p. 87.

sources, but also in great works of literature. The plays of Shakespeare were, of course, one of these sources. Another was the Lusiad of Camoëns.²³ Camoëns, like Melville, had been a sailor, and he wrote of the sea as a primordially symbolic force in much the same manner as Melville did. As Arvin shows, the Luciad abounds with nautical terror, much of which Melville borrowed.²⁴ Arvin adds that in his old age Melville wrote two short poems about Camoëns in which he clearly identified himself, in his obscurity and solitude, with his great Portuguese predecessor.²⁵

²³ Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 149.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

²⁵ Ibid.

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STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The recent criticism of Moby-Dick has discarded the theory that Melville was an unconscious artist who stumbled into greatness. The new critics have found affinities between Melville's prose in Moby-Dick and the work of the metaphysical poets and of Shakespeare. Upon structural inquiry, some of Melville's prose has been found to be, in reality, poetry. The consistency of his imagery and metaphorical language is undeniable. At the same time the originality of Melville's style has not gone unnoticed. But, generally speaking, it is only the very recent criticism which has afforded Melville the attention he deserves as a prominent stylist among American prose writers.

Melville's metaphysical style has been well analyzed by F. O. Matthiessen, who feels that the style of Moby-Dick unites the world of thought and the world of action.¹ He credits this to Melville's technique of not allowing metaphysical abstractions to interfere with the physical structure of the narrative. He cites Father Mapple's sermon and the chapter called "The Mat Maker" as beautifully organized examples of Melville's style at its best. In "The Mat Maker" Matthiessen believes that Melville was able to express abstraction with a simple vocabulary. He believes that this chapter portrays not

¹ F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression In the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 184.

THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

The history of the United States is a story of growth and development. It begins with the first settlers who came to the continent in search of a better life. They found a land of vast resources and a people who were determined to build a new nation. The story of the United States is a story of the struggle for freedom and the pursuit of the American dream. It is a story of the men and women who have shaped the course of our history and the values that have guided us through the most difficult times. The history of the United States is a story of hope and the belief that a better future is within our grasp.

The history of the United States is a story of the people who have built this nation. It is a story of the men and women who have fought for freedom and the rights of all citizens. It is a story of the men and women who have worked hard to build a better life for themselves and for their children. The history of the United States is a story of the values that have guided us through the most difficult times. It is a story of the men and women who have shaped the course of our history and the values that have guided us through the most difficult times. The history of the United States is a story of hope and the belief that a better future is within our grasp.

only Ishmael's thoughts but Ishmael's mind in the process of discovering those thoughts:²

As I kept passing and repassing the filling or woof of marline between the long yarns of the warp, using my own hand for the shuttle, and as Queequeg, standing sideways, ever and anon slid his heavy oaken sword between the threads, and idly looking off upon the water, carelessly and unthinkingly drove home every yarn: I say so strange a dreaminess did there then reign all over the ship and all over the sea, only broken by the intermitting dull sound of the sword, that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates.³

Matthiessen states that at this point the calmly described scene becomes an image for a metaphysical conceit.

There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed a necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance--aye, chance, free will, and necessity--no wise incompatible--all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course--its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.⁴

² Ibid., p. 126.

³ Moby-Dick, p. 202.

⁴ Ibid.

Matthiessen credits Shakespeare with the influence that brought Melville's prose to a level of vital rhetoric. From Shakespeare Melville gained the ability to make language itself dramatic without the aid of a dramatic situation. Matthiessen points out that even the chapters on cetology in Moby-Dick employ Melville's rhetoric.⁵

Melville's language developed an original rhythm through which he could express passion, by cadenced verse, as he had never been able to before.⁶ As an example, Matthiessen breaks a passage from "The Quarter Deck" into blank verse:

But look ye, Starbuck, what is said in heat,
That thing unsays itself. There are men
From whom warm words are small indignity.
I meant not to incense thee. Let it go.
Look! see yonder Turkish cheeks or spotted tawn--
Living, breathing picture painted by the sun.
The pagan leopards--the unrecking and
Unworshipping things, that live; and seek and give
No reason for the torrid life they feel!⁷

William Ellery Sedgwick believes that Melville had linguistic and stylistic affinities with Thoreau, Whitman, and Emily Dickinson in regard to vivid visualization of life through language.⁸ "No book of its age, not Leaves of Grass, is more

⁵ Matthiessen, p. 431.

⁶ Ibid., p. 426.

⁷ Moby-Dick, p. 154.

⁸ William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), p. 95.

thoroughly American than Moby-Dick, and no book of any age is more greatly American. Melville dispensed with all the fancy dress and masquerade that Whitman called the 'feudalism' of poetry as drastically as Whitman did himself."⁹ In associating Melville with the great American writers of the nineteenth century Sedgwick points out that Melville's style and imagery are essentially American.¹⁰ When he refers to an eagle in a simile for spiritual daring, it is a Catskill eagle. Ahab is described as a shaggy grizzly bear from Missouri. Sedgwick maintains that Melville wove into the fabric of Moby-Dick whatever materials offered American reference and allusion.

Stanley Geist has noted that Melville's use of imagery is as consistent as Shakespeare's in King Lear. He traces the imagery associated with Ahab and believes that it expresses the motive of heroic suffering.¹¹ Ahab is described as "a man out away from the stake when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them. . . ."¹² When Ishmael speaks of Ahab he refers to "that burnt-out crater of

⁹ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 89.

¹¹ Stanley Geist, Herman Melville: The Tragic Vision and the Heroic Ideal (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), pp. 45-47.

¹² Moby-Dick, p. 114.

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his brain."¹³ Ahab describes himself in suffering imagery: "The lightning flashes through my skull; mine eyeballs ache and ache; my whole beaten brain seems as beheaded and rolling on some stunning ground."¹⁴ Geist points out that Ahab becomes a figure in torment by association with imagery, rather than by direct implication.¹⁵

Newton Arvin has examined Melville's style in terms of his similes, metaphors, imagery, and invention of words. He believes that Melville's similes are easily related to those employed by Homer and Virgil in their epics.¹⁶ The whales in Moby-Dick are constantly subjected to these similes. In the chapter "The Grand Armada" a great school of whales, passing through the Straits of Sunda, is likened to an army accelerating its march through an unfriendly defile in the mountains, "all eagerness to place that perilous passage in their rear."¹⁷ Melville constantly sustains the imagery of warfare between whalers and whales, Arvin believes, in order to delude the reader from the butchery and carnage that are at the heart of whaling.¹⁸

¹³ Ibid., p. 501.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 472.

¹⁵ Geist, p. 45.

¹⁶ Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 159.

¹⁷ Moby-Dick, p. 359.

¹⁸ Arvin, p. 160.

Arvin suggests that Melville's elaborate metaphors form a "signature" for Moby-Dick. Certain words are used again and again by Melville: wild, wildly, and wildness; moody and moodiness--especially in reference to Ahab; mystic, mysterious; subtle, subtly, subtlety; wondrous, nameless, intense, and malicious.¹⁹ Constant use of these words never allows the reader to stray from Moby-Dick's dark theme.

Arvin notes that the English language seemed, on occasion, to be a limited tool for Melville's expression and that he often invented nouns (usually in the plural) for his expression: regardings, allurings, intercedings, wanings, coincoidings, and domineerings.²⁰ Sometimes, Arvin states, he avoided this practice by composing compounds reminiscent of the metaphysical poets ("A valor-ruined man," "the message-carrying air," "the circus-running sun," "the teeth-tiered sharks," and "the god-bullied hull").²¹ Arvin believes that Melville's style was perfectly adapted to his dark theme:

In all these cases, of course, he has boldly made verbs out of nouns or adjectives; and indeed, from this point of view, the manner in which the parts of speech are "intermixingly" assorted in Melville's style--so that the distinction between verbs and nouns, substantives and modifiers, becomes a half unreal one--this is the prime characteristic of his language. No feature of it could express more tellingly the awareness that lies below and behind Moby-Dick--the awareness that action and condition, movement and stasis, object and idea are but surface aspects of one underlying reality.²²

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 163.

²¹ Ibid., p. 164.

²² Ibid., p. 165.

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Howard Vincent states that Melville's masterpiece of style is the closing scene of the book in which the Pequod sinks in a vortex. His analysis of this scene is of great interest:

Sound and sense come together as only in the best poetry. The swirling polysyllables parallel the spin of the Pequod in the vortex; the long streaming clauses rise and fall with the swell of the ocean waves themselves, stirring the sensibilities of the reader to the breaking point as he mounts to the measureless crush and crash of the climax. And then, with a dramatic shift, the style becomes simple, sharp, the beat regular and clear in the short paragraph with which the scene closes. It is as though the great orchestra has suddenly stopped--save for the percussion, which beats pianissimo the concluding measures. The monosyllables of the closing words are as the falling of clods on the coffin of the Pequod.²³

The following is the passage Vincent analyzes. It is certainly one of the finest passages in Moby-Dick:

But as the last whelmings intermixingly poured themselves over the sunken head of the Indian at the mainmast, leaving a few inches of the erect spar yet visible, together with long streaming yards of the flag, which calmly undulated, with ironical coincidings, over the destroying billows they almost touched;--at that instant, a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar. A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with arch-angelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with

his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.²⁴

STRUCTURE

It should be apparent, to even the casual reader of Herman Melville's novel, that Moby-Dick possesses a unique structure. Superficially, the book would seem to borrow its structure from many sources: the epic poem, the whaling text-book, the Gothic novel, the sea story, and the symbolic allegory. Yet Moby-Dick is more than a blend of these ingredients. In analyzing its structure the recent critics have been hard pressed for definitions. However, there would seem to be general critical agreement that, whatever the structural skeleton upon which Moby-Dick is built, the form of the book suits the contents. As Newton Arvin puts it:

To speak of the structure and the texture of Moby-Dick is to embark upon a series of paradoxes that are soberly truthful and precise. Few books of its dimensions have owed so much to books that have preceded them, and few have owed so little; not many imaginative works have so strong and strict a unity, and not many are composed of such various and even discordant materials; few great novels have been comparably concrete, factual, and prosaic, and few of course have been so large and comprehensive in their generality, so poetic both in their large surface fabric and in their central nature. In form alone Moby-Dick is unique. . . .¹

In form Arvin finds Moby-Dick an epic, akin to the other great epics of world literature: the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the

¹ Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 151.

It should be pointed out, however, that even the second series of human
relationships, that poly-gamy, possesses a unique character.

Accordingly, the book would seem to deserve the attention

that has been given it by the Journal of the American Anthropological Association.

The Journal itself, in its review, has not only praised the book, but has also

recommended it as a valuable addition to the literature of the subject.

It is therefore with some confidence that we can recommend this book to the

attention of all those who are interested in the study of human relationships.

It is a book that should be read by all who are interested in the subject.

It is a book that is well written, and is full of interesting facts.

As Newton Arvin writes in:

In view of the fact that the study of human relationships is a subject of increasing importance, and that the book of the Journal of the American Anthropological Association has been one of the most valuable contributions to the literature of the subject, it is not surprising that the book has been so widely read and so highly praised. The book is a valuable addition to the literature of the subject, and is well written, and is full of interesting facts. It is a book that should be read by all who are interested in the subject.

It is a book that is well written, and is full of interesting facts.

As Newton Arvin writes in:

It is a book that should be read by all who are interested in the subject.

Lusiads.²

Taking his hint from the chapter titled "The Symphony," Arvin believes that Moby-Dick's structure falls into the symphonic form of four movements: the introductory chapters up to the sailing of the Pequod, the chapters up to the nailing of the doubloon on the quarter-deck, the central portion of the novel which ends with the Pequod encountering the Delight, and the conclusion which begins with "The Symphony."³ With these four sections a unity is obtained, Arvin believes, by the principle of variety, not only in pitch, but also in speed of narrative.

F. O. Matthiessen believes that Moby-Dick has a dramatic construction. Like a Shakespeare play it is revealing on many levels. On the lowest level there is plot. Then, on successively deeper levels, Moby-Dick reveals character, implications, meaning, poetry, and musical language.⁴ Matthiessen believes that only the conclusion is undramatic and that is because it is unstageable.⁵ Matthiessen divides the action into nine scenes:

- 1) The New England scene which introduces a contrast of sea and land.

² Ibid., p. 157.

³ Ibid., pp. 157-158.

⁴ F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 415.

⁵ Ibid., p. 421.

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- 2) The beginning of the voyage. The characters and industry are introduced along with whaling legends.
- 3) Ahab makes his delayed entrance. More cetology and facts on the whaling industry.
- 4) Sequences of scenes on deck; Ahab's purpose, soliloquies; forebodings.
- 5) Suspense produced by the passing of other ships. Narrative and drama are interwoven.
- 6) Two hundred pages of delayed action: cetology creates the final suspense.
- 7) Conflict between Ahab and Starbuck.
- 8) Ahab's pagan worship.
- 9) Final Scene.⁶

Matthiessen adds to this outline of the structure his belief that Melville borrowed some of Shakespeare's structural devices.⁷ Although he believes Melville was poor at "comic relief" (i.e., the black cook Fleece, and Stubb's dream), he was superb at Shakespeare's serious structural devices. Fedallah's prophecies, for example, are of parallel importance to the witches' prophecies in Macbeth. Pip is dramatically equivalent to Lear's fool. The pledges involved during the tempering of Ahab's harpoon are similar to Horatio's and Marcellus's pledges to Hamlet.⁸

Charles Olson also believes Moby-Dick has a dramatic structure. He divides the novel into the five acts of an

⁶Ibid., pp. 417-421.

⁷Ibid., p. 432.

⁸Ibid., p. 434.

Elizabethan tragedy. He points out that the first twenty-two chapters, during which Ishmael is the central consciousness, are precedent to the main action and prepare the reader for it. Chapter twenty-three ("The Lee Shore") is an interlude. Then the drama begins, and the first act ends with the appearance of Ahab on the quarter-deck. Cetology forms another interlude.

Merely to summarize what follows, the book then moves up to the meeting with the Jeroboam and her mad prophet Gabriel (chp. LXXI) and, after that, in a third swell, into the visit of Ahab to the Samuel Enderby to see her captain who had lost his arm as Ahab his leg to Moby Dick (chp. C). The peak of the action is the storm scene, THE CANDLES. From that point on Ahab comes to repose, fifth act, in his fate.⁹

Olson believes that the cetology makes Moby-Dick an unstageable drama, yet he acknowledges its purpose: "Actually and deliberately the whaling chapters brake the advance of the plot."¹⁰ By slowing the plot, the cetology serves a two-fold purpose: the narrative becomes less Gothic; and whaling becomes more realistic. The cetology is, then, ballast for the book.

Howard Vincent is in agreement with Olson's theory of the structural value of the cetology. He adds that the cetology gives the novel a sense of passing time and, at the same time, changes the pitch of the book. "Melville must momentarily change pace, descend to a planissimo. . . . The planissimo fourth act prepares the spectators for the thunderous fortissimi of the culminating fifth act. Thus Macbeth, and Hamlet. And

⁹ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael (New York, 1947), pp. 66-67.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

similarly, Moby-Dick.¹¹

William Ellery Sedgwick feels that Moby-Dick has structural parallels with all of Melville's earlier novels (Typee, Omoo, Mardi, Redburn, and White-Jacket) as a tale of the sea. But he questions whether the book may be analyzed beyond that point: "Is Moby-Dick a novel? It is no more a novel than it is an epic and no more an epic than a tragedy--in the sense that Shakespeare, for instance, conceived tragedy. Moby-Dick is not to be comprehended unless . . . it is seen in infinite perspectives."¹² He adds: "The consciousness which is organically present cannot be explained otherwise than by pointing to some of its effects. The book is a hodge-podge of adventure story, moral drama, mysticism, practical information, diatribe. Yet all these apparently ill assorted ingredients cling together. More than that they are felt to flow into one another."¹³

Perhaps the best summary of Moby-Dick's structure is that of Yvor Winters:

The book has more or less defied classification, yet chiefly because it fuses categories in the matter of structure, so as to produce a new structure, and because it is long and complex and has been imperfectly studied: it is beyond a cavil one of the most carefully and successfully constructed of all the

¹¹ Howard P. Vincent, The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick (Boston, 1949), p. 122.

¹² William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), p. 83.

¹³ Ibid., p. 134.

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major works of literature; to find it careless, redundant, or in any sense romantic, as even its professed admirers are prone to do, is merely to misread the book and to be ignorant of the history leading up to it.¹⁴

It may be a matter for debate as to how "imperfectly studied" the structure of Moby-Dick has been. Yet there can be no question that the structural phase of Melville's art in Moby-Dick has not received the attention that the recent critics have lavished upon its symbolism and meaning.

¹⁴

Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1948), p. 219.

CHARACTERIZATION

In the chapter in Moby-Dick entitled "Knights and Squires" Melville forewarns his readers that his characters are not going to be realistically depicted:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; . . . Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God!¹

Melville chose to draw his mariners within a valorous framework of ideal nobility of the mind and "democratic dignity."

By avoiding the common idiomatic talk of sailors Melville chose rather to express their souls than their surface appearances (which social and literary taboos of 1851 would have objected to).

Opinions vary on Melville's success at characterization. William Ellery Sedgwick feels that it was one of Melville's flaws. W. H. Auden finds characterization one of Melville's triumphs. The answer perhaps lies in the character of Ahab.

F. O. Matthiessen and Charles Olson are of the opinion that Ahab's character is too richly complex to be reduced to a formula. Matthiessen suggests that, like the Elizabethan tragedies of revenge, Ahab is both hero and villain, both

¹
Moby-Dick, p. 108.

good and evil.² Olson adds that there is an inexplicable side to Ahab's character that can only be grasped intuitively. Even Ishmael, he points out, admits that there is a deeper and larger part of the man that is obscure. Olson believes that it was Melville's intention for the reader, like Ishmael, to understand Ahab through the intuition, rather than in concrete terms.³

Sedgwick believes that Ahab's madness springs from an excess of humanity: "Melville made Ahab a Kingly character; mad--like King Lear--with the madness of vital truth."⁴ Sedgwick points out that Ahab never loses his king-like attitude, even in defeat. Ahab's king-like qualities convince Howard P. Vincent that Ahab was a true Aristotelean tragic hero. Writing in a democracy Melville was hard put to set up an autocratic King. But Vincent believes that the Pequod serves as a kingdom for its captain and Ahab has, in all other respects, the Aristotelean qualifications for a tragic hero.⁵

The best examination of character in Moby-Dick is that of W. H. Auden. In his interpretation, Ishmael and Ahab are both

² F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 454.

³ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael (New York, 1947), pp. 84-85.

⁴ William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), p. 108.

⁵ Howard P. Vincent, The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick (Boston, 1949), p. 109.

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...of the man that is known. When he is known, he

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heroes. Ishmael is the Romantic hero who follows his imagination. His role is passive in the action of the novel, but he is nevertheless heroic.

Ahab, on the other hand, is a religious hero. Auden defines the religious hero as a man who is devoted to a cause with an absolute passion. He is a religious hero even if his cause is ethically and universally untrue.⁶ Unlike the Romantic hero, the Religious hero does try to teach and influence those about him.

The key to Ahab's characterization, Auden believes, is the curse he has received before the novel begins. Ahab's reaction to his curse is defiance. He becomes a counterfeit saint who welcomes hardships and pursues violence.⁷ Ahab's error lies in his fatal reaction to his curse. The development of Ahab's character in Moby-Dick is, Auden claims, merely his attempts to strengthen himself in his resolution and vengeful pursuit.

Auden believes that the crew of the Pequod undergoes no conscious character development. Their setting to sea is an act of historical existence, yet they are unwittingly changed before our eyes and "reveal themselves . . . in what they say and do."⁸ The four harpooners, Auden points out with some

⁶ W. H. Auden, The Enchafed Flood (New York, 1950), p. 97.

⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

⁸ Ibid., p. 122.

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discernment, are untormented by any knowledge of the problem of evil in existence and fail to live up to the challenge of consciousness as the plot moves along.⁹

The three mates all suffer from spiritual sloth, on varying levels. According to Auden they are all cognizant that they are disobeying God in obeying Ahab.¹⁰ The Carpenter and the Blacksmith, on the other hand, are men who have already suffered a spiritual death and are simply awaiting the superimposition of a physical death. Pip is Ahab's opposite--his despair arises from weakness while Ahab's despair comes from defiance.¹¹

Auden's theory of the characterization in Moby-Dick is an important supplement to understanding his interpretation of the central meaning of the book. Auden is, however, one of the few critics who has considered Melville's characterization separate from his symbolism and meaning.

⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 136.

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Chapter II

CRITICISM APPEARING IN PERIODICALS ON MOBY-DICK

SYMBOLISM

The center of most discussions of Moby-Dick is usually an attempt to discover its ultimate meaning. By far the largest amount of periodical criticism of Moby-Dick concerns itself with the intention, symbolism, and allegory of the novel. There is little agreement among critics on the subject. Some attempt to point out Melville's specific meaning. Others abandon Moby-Dick to the classification of a "myth" which may have different meanings for different ages and peoples. But almost all readers and critics agree that the novel has a compelling power to fascinate and stimulate the imagination.

There are all types of criticism of Moby-Dick. The two extremes are well represented by Montgomery Belgion and Richard Chase. Belgion denies all symbolic intent on Melville's part,

Chapter II

THEORY OF THE ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSE

INTRODUCTION

The theory of the origin of the universe is one of the most important and interesting subjects in the history of science. It is a subject which has attracted the attention of philosophers, scientists, and the general public alike. The history of the theory of the origin of the universe is a long and complex one, and it is not possible to do justice to it in a single chapter. However, it is possible to give a brief outline of the main ideas and theories which have been advanced in the history of the theory of the origin of the universe.

The first and most important question which arises in the mind of the student of the theory of the origin of the universe is: What is the origin of the universe? This question has been asked by philosophers and scientists alike, and it has been the subject of many different theories and hypotheses. The most common theories which have been advanced in the history of the theory of the origin of the universe are the theory of creation, the theory of evolution, and the theory of the big bang.

The theory of creation is the oldest and most widely known theory of the origin of the universe. It is a theory which has been advanced by many different religions and philosophies, and it is a theory which has been the subject of much controversy and debate. The theory of evolution is a theory which was first advanced by Charles Darwin in the mid-19th century. It is a theory which has been the subject of much controversy and debate, and it is a theory which has been the subject of much research and investigation.

The theory of the big bang is a theory which was first advanced by Georges Lemaitre in the early 20th century. It is a theory which has been the subject of much controversy and debate, and it is a theory which has been the subject of much research and investigation. The theory of the big bang is a theory which has been the subject of much controversy and debate, and it is a theory which has been the subject of much research and investigation.

and Chase affirms more symbols than have ever before been seen in Melville's work. Both views deserve attention as indications of the positions of two schools of Melville criticism.

Belgion assumes what he admits to be a heterodox position in denying all symbolism in Moby-Dick. He believes that the source of the book's popularity and greatness lies elsewhere. A not uncommon position for a critic reading the book in symbolic terms would be to interpret Ahab as Man at his full measure against the Universe, Moby Dick as the mystery of evil, and the sea as Life. These three symbols are generally accepted.

In contrast to this view, Belgion points out that Ishmael is always at great pains to make the story appear believable and realistic lest landmen take it as "an intolerable allegory."¹ He cites Melville's confusing letters which seem to back up the view that the book was not consciously written with symbols.

Belgion believes that Moby-Dick is not a fable but rather a fabulous tale. The fabulous setting allows the entrance of philosophizing (not philosophy), which is the book's real attraction. Philosophizing, as Belgion points out, is an American trait which may be found in Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Poe. This quality, and not the meaning of the

¹ Montgomery Belgion, "Heterodoxy on Moby-Dick," Sewanee Review, XV (January-March, 1947), 110.

and the author's own knowledge of the world.

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symbolism, gives the book its flavor and makes it attractive to readers.

Belgion's argument is most convincing when he suggests that reading the book without symbolic intent robs it of none of its imaginative impact. The reader's sensibilities are fired by the images and small truths: "The fall of valor in the Soul"; "Time places not on any map"; and "Shoreless, indefinite as God."²

Melville does not lose stature in Belgion's interpretation but rather becomes a prose Shakespeare who offers no meaning to life, but profoundly moves us, like Shakespeare, to a poignant and vague yearning over life's mysteries.

Richard Chase, on the other hand, reads Moby-Dick as a symbolic act or artistic representation of Melville himself. Melville projects himself, to a certain extent, into his own characters.³ He designates the following symbols as being active in Moby-Dick, all of which are also reflections of Melville himself: The Wounded Man--Ahab; The Divine Inert--Pip; The Handsome Sailor--Bulkington; and Prometheus--Ahab.⁴ Chase finds these symbols not only in Moby-Dick but also in

²
Ibid., p. 124.

³
Richard Chase, "An Approach to Melville," Partisan Review, XV (May-June, 1947), 286.

⁴
Ibid., pp. 286-294.

most of Melville's other work. Thus Melville is to him a conscious symbolic artist throughout his literary life.

Walter Weber is in partial agreement with Chase in his interpretation of Melville as a symbolist. To Weber, Melville was a writer who, while constantly seeking a harmony in the universe, was nevertheless unafraid to face discord and admit that, to his view, the world was a monstrous organism. Weber believes that Melville's symbols record his attempt to see this disorder in the universe took form through four types, or levels, of symbols:

- 1) Biblical symbols of revolt (Hagar and Ishmael, Jonah, Cain, and Ahab).
- 2) Figures taken from Greek mythology (Prometheus, the Fates, and Medusa).
- 3) Egyptian history (Sphinxes, Pyramids, and antique Egyptian gloom).
- 4) The Demon Principle lying at the base of an evil world.⁵

Melville employs these symbols, Weber claims, in the order given above. The demon principle is the most rarely used, but it is Melville's deepest symbol. Weber's conclusion is that it was Melville's belief that "the whole universe (not only civilization), with beauty and happiness and all, is a

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Walter Weber, "Some Characteristic Symbols in Herman Melville's Works," English Studies, XXX (October, 1949), 221-222.

monstrous lie."⁶

The majority of critics, however, believe that Moby-Dick will not hold together as a continued allegory and that the symbolism is fragmentary. It is related to certain themes and scenes rather than to the book as a whole.

As an example of this fragmentary symbolism, Sumner Scott suggests the typhoon scene in Moby-Dick. Scott charts the course of the Pequod during the typhoon and points out that the ship changes course seven times.⁷ The tension between Ahab and Starbuck is at its height during the typhoon. Starbuck who may be roughly characterized as representing the Christian man, gains the ascendancy over the Pequod with nature's aid in order to steer away from the waters where Moby Dick may be presumed to be. Each time Ahab conquers nature and man to set the Pequod on his demoniacal course. Here the symbolism is fairly obvious.

Nathalia Wright has pointed out the biblical symbolism in Moby-Dick. The book contains one hundred fifty-five Biblical references, two-thirds of which are from the Old Testament.⁸ Most of the references are involved in Melville's imagery, as

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Ibid., p. 224.

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Sumner Scott, "Some Implications of the Typhoon Scenes in Moby-Dick," American Literature, XII (March, 1950), 94.

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Nathalia Wright, "Biblical Allusion in Melville's Prose," American Literature, XII (July, 1940), 185.

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for example, the cries of seals are "like half articulated wailing of the ghosts of all Herod's murdered Innocents."⁹

Many of the names of characters in Moby-Dick are drawn from the Old Testament. Their significance is, if not symbolical, at least suggestive and allusive. Ishmael, "the man at odds with his fellows," is a reflection of a similar figure in the Bible: "And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren." [Genesis: 16:12]. Ahab is identified with the Bible in the text of Moby-Dick: "He's Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king!"¹⁰ There are several parallels between Melville's Ahab and his Biblical prototype. Both men worship pagan gods, follow false prophets, and receive fatal warnings of the truth.¹¹ To this extent Starbuck resembles the prophet Micaiah. In another sense, Miss Wright claims, he resembles Obadiah, the God-fearing governor of Ahab's house. Elijah is fundamentally the same character in the Bible and in Moby-Dick--the sooth-sayer.¹²

Miss Wright points out that the several ships that pass the Pequod have names of Biblical significance. The Jeroboam harks back to Ahab's distant predecessor in the Bible. In

⁹ Moby-Dick, p. 485.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

¹¹ Wright, p. 189.

¹² Ibid., p. 191.

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Moby-Dick the Jeroboam has preceded Ahab in encountering the white whale.

Other ships and numerous minor characters are named after Biblical characters. Miss Wright points out that the significance of their names is minor. The Biblical personalities do not form a basis for an allegory but are employed as hints of character.¹³ A complete application of the Biblical pattern to the threads of plot in Moby-Dick inevitably stretches it to the breaking point.

The fire symbolism in Moby-Dick has been examined by Charles C. Walcott. Ahab's worship of fire seems a Gothic touch on the surface, but Walcott claims it is subtle symbolism in Melville's writing. He assumes that Melville intended Ahab to have aligned himself with Zoroastrianism, which divides the universe with a dichotomy of good and evil. The God of good is the God of light, and therefore, Ahab worships fire.¹⁴ Walcott believes that fire is the complementary symbol to the whale. Ahab must, like the Phoenix, experience the destruction of fire in order to comprehend the purification of fire.¹⁵

Perhaps the most controversial interpretation of Moby-Dick is that of W. H. Auden, who sees Captain Ahab as a symbol of

¹³
Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁴
Charles C. Walcott, "The Fire Symbolism in Moby-Dick," Modern Language Notes, LIX (May, 1944), 306.

¹⁵
Ibid., p. 308.

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the Christian tragic hero, a man who is offered a choice and makes the wrong one.¹⁶ He contrasts Ahab with the Greek tragic hero who has no choice and who is ruined by fate rather than by his incorrect choice.

Objectifying evil in one whale is a brilliant intellectual achievement, according to Auden, but Ahab's plan to seek vengeance is his error.¹⁷ Ahab's subsequent life becomes a negative parody on the life of a saint. In obverse, he is tempted like a saint and throws off earthly ties (quadrants, pipes, etc.) and involves himself in religious rites for internal strengthening.

Ahab dies, like Shakespeare's tragic heroes, unrepentant of his choice. Ishmael survives because he is only a consciousness, not a will to good or evil. He sees both sides but makes no choice. He cannot die because he cannot live, and he is born again in the floating coffin into a world of the Christian choice.¹⁸

At one time it was fashionable to read Moby-Dick as an allegory. This tendency is dying out among recent critics. Robert Berkelman, in defending the allegorical point of view, admits that allegory can only be suggestive and equivocal in

¹⁶

W. H. Auden, "The Christian Tragic Hero," New York Times Book Review (December 16, 1945), p. 1.

¹⁷

Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸

Ibid.

The first of these is the fact that the...
the second is the fact that the...
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Moby-Dick. He maintains that only one character is consistent in the allegory, and this is Ahab. He is "defiant man against blind nature and evil."¹⁹ Many critics skirt the issue and classify Moby-Dick as a "myth." Their reasons are that it is written in a unique style about a unique subject matter. Furthermore, its ultimate meaning would appear to be equivocal and elusive.

Taking the "mythological" approach, R. W. Short comments:

Even the laziest reader wants to make some pursuit of the mysteries. Here lies the essential Melville problem. If we can reduce to general terms both quest and goal, we shall understand why none of the interpreters, even of the contradictory ones, has been wholly wrong; and why to most of us Melville's meaning seems so near and at the same time so remote.²⁰

Short believes that Melville was definitely not a writer of allegory, and he cites as evidence Melville's letter to Mrs. Hawthorne which he believes records Melville's surprise and lack of enthusiasm at hearing that Hawthorne had attached an allegorical meaning to the work. Strict allegory is rationalistic, whereas Moby-Dick is never rationalistic. Therefore,

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Robert Berkelman, "Moby-Dick: Curiosity or Classic?" English Journal, XXVII (November, 1938), 747.

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R. W. Short, "Melville as Symbolist," University of Kansas City Review, XXI (Autumn, 1948), 38.

THE COURT - The defendant has been charged with the murder of the victim.

It is the duty of the jury to determine whether the defendant is guilty of the crime charged.

The evidence presented at the trial is as follows:

On the night of the murder, the defendant was seen near the victim's residence.

The victim was found with fatal wounds, and the defendant was found with a bloody knife.

The defendant has a history of mental illness, and it is suggested that he may not be responsible for his actions.

The jury is instructed to consider the evidence and determine the defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The jury is also instructed to consider the defendant's mental state at the time of the crime.

The jury is further instructed to consider the defendant's character and past behavior.

The jury is instructed to return a verdict of guilty or not guilty.

The jury is instructed to deliberate in private and to reach a unanimous decision.

The jury is instructed to return to the courtroom when the judge calls them back.

The jury is instructed to follow the instructions of the court.

The jury is instructed to consider the evidence and the law.

The jury is instructed to return a verdict of guilty or not guilty.

The jury is instructed to deliberate in private and to reach a unanimous decision.

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The jury is instructed to return to the courtroom when the judge calls them back.

The jury is instructed to follow the instructions of the court.

the symbolism in Moby-Dick is of value only when a specific meaning is not attached to the symbol. Melville presents the "pasteboard mask" and allows the reader to follow it through to his own interpretation.

Short believes that the equivocal nature of Melville's symbols allows them to "accumulate meanings in the course of their use, as they knock about in his myth world, and so a single meaning attached to them often has at least a partial validity."²¹ By the same token, no single meaning seems constantly true throughout the novel. Melville's symbols blur into one another, merge, and assume new identities. This is attractive criticism for those readers who are baffled by the ambiguities of the novel and confounded by the widespread disagreement among critics about Moby-Dick's symbols.

²¹ Ibid., p. 44.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The chief activity of Melville's intellect as exhibited in Moby-Dick is his concern with the problem of evil. Like the reading public, the critics have devoted considerable attention to the matter. Melville's symbolical representation of evil in nature had appeared in his earlier novels (notably Mardi), but it had never previously served as the theme of an entire work.

William Dix has suggested that Melville's sense of evil came from a Calvinistic sense of sin. He cites as a source for this belief Melville's essay, Hawthorne and His Mosses:

. . . that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance.¹

Dix traces this sentiment through many of Melville's works. The consummate statement of the problem is found, of course, in Moby-Dick. The treatment of the problem of evil is primarily what raises the book above a mere sea-story. "The antagonist is an inscrutable Fate, in the form of a whale, of all evil, of God himself. And the protagonist, Captain Ahab, is a

¹ Herman Melville, The Complete Works of Herman Melville (London, 1922-1924), XIII, 129.

worthy one."²

Here, then, is high tragedy which, according to Nietzsche's definition, is the only art form which can concern itself with the problem of evil. Melville had a genuine tragic vision and was concerned with humanity's plight on earth. He escaped Emerson's and Whitman's optimism, which they later came to modify. Dix concludes by calling Melville America's great tragic artist of the nineteenth century.³

Rudolph von Abele has pointed out that Melville's view of the problem of evil was fundamentally that of William Blake in "The Tyger":

And did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

This dilemma, von Abele believes, is the problem that Melville states masterfully through Ahab. Ahab's quest is a humane one in finding a meaning for evil. But his tragedy lies in separating himself from human nature to fight it. In abandoning humanity for his Promethean task, Ahab becomes a mono-maniac.⁴

² William S. Dix, "Herman Melville and the Problem of Evil," Rice Institute Pamphlet, XLV (July, 1948), 98.

³ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴ Rudolph von Abele, "Melville and the Problem of Evil," American Mercury, LXV (November, 1947), 594.

... is a high tragedy which, according to Nietzsche's
 philosophy, is the only one which can contain itself with
 the knowledge of evil. Nietzsche has a genuine tragic vision and
 his sympathy with humanity's plight on earth. He regarded
 Nietzsche's socialism, which they later came to
 regard, was concluded by calling Nietzsche America's great
 prophet of the nineteenth century.

... the tragedy!

And did he realize his role in life?
 Did he who made the world more free?

... von Ardenne believes, in the problem that Nietzsche
 is posing a meaning for evil. His tragic vision is
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Ahab, whom von Abele assumes to be speaking for Melville, develops a belief in free will out of his consciousness. Because of this free will he is a rebel against nature and the price of rebellion is annihilation. This, von Abele believes, is Melville's central opinion on the problem of evil.⁵

Von Abele's discussion of free will brings up the controversy over the ambiguous chapter entitled "The Mat Maker" (Chapter XLVII). Ishmael and Queequeg are weaving a mat from a ball of yarn that is fancifully described as the ball of free will: ". . . with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads."⁶ But then Ishmael adds:

The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course--its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turn rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.⁷

Carvel Collins has expressed the belief that this passage reveals Melville's intellectual acceptance of insurmountable fate.⁸ But another critic, G. Giovanni, defends free will and

⁵ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 202.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Carvel Collins, "Melville's Moby-Dick," Explicator, IV (February, 1946), no. 27.

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states that Melville's intention here was only to show how fate can limit free will. He claims that necessity, and not fatalism, is at the root of Melville's metaphysics.⁹

Clifton Fadiman finds the problem of evil projected from Ahab to the crew also projected to the readers. The evil that Ahab sees in the world he projects into the whale. The crew (and the readers) do not share this projection directly. Rather they experience a subconscious realization that Ahab is a symbol of their (and our) common fears of the universe.¹⁰

Fadiman believes that the crew, hero, and the readers are all swept into the book by the universal significance of Ahab's recognition of evil. Melville's vision of evil produced a book that simulated for the reader that "neither world which is the defiant but secretly terror stricken soul of man, alone and appalled by this aloneness."¹¹

R. E. Watters has argued that in his three great novels, Moby-Dick, Mardi, and Pierre, Melville was trying to find an answer to the problem of evil. Life to Melville was obviously a dichotomy of good and evil. According to Watters' classification, Mardi presents the sociology of evil; Moby-Dick, the

⁹ G. Giovanni, "Melville's Moby-Dick," Explicator, IV (February, 1946), no. 27.

¹⁰ Clifton Fadiman, "Herman Melville," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXII (October, 1943), 90.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 91.

metaphysics of evil; and Pierre, the psychology of evil.¹²

Melville's dichotomy of evil and good is not given a solution in Moby-Dick, but is merely stated: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event --in the living act, the undoubted deed--there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!"¹³ Watters sees Ahab himself as torn between the evil Fedallah and the good Starbuck and Pip. The sea is described as beautiful yet treacherous. In the objective world the whale represents to Melville's metaphysics the "accidental malice of chance."¹⁴ Watters believes that Melville is an advocate of neither free will nor fatalism. The celebrated and much-discussed chapter, "The Mat Maker," leads him to believe that Melville advocated necessitarianism or original causation as his theory of metaphysics.¹⁵ Melville's romantic concepts made him believe that rebellious hatred in great men is a necessary response to a necessary metaphysical pattern.

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R. E. Watters, "Melville's Metaphysics of Evil," University of Toronto Quarterly, IX (January, 1940), 173.

13

Moby-Dick, p. 153.

14

Watters, p. 179.

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Ibid., p. 179.

In Moby-Dick Melville's approach is a negative statement of the problem of evil. Only hints of a solution appear, Watters believes: "Man's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another."¹⁶ Watters' opinion is that the final solution of the problem of evil for Melville was to wait forty years for statement in Billy Budd.

Perhaps the most controversial reading of Melville's intentions in handling the problem of evil has been put forward by Henry Alonzo Myers. His central thesis is that Ahab obtains victory in defeat, that the tragic view of life is his triumph. Myers denies many of the supposed symbols in Moby-Dick and maintains that they are half-truths aimed at directing the attention to the central meaning and are not to be taken as hidden meanings in themselves.¹⁷ Melville himself denies in the text that the book is a "hideous and intolerable allegory."¹⁸ Ahab's arrival at the tragic view of life may be best summed up in Myers's own words:

What is the tragic meaning of Moby-Dick? . . . Evil and good are the necessary poles of experience. One is not to be had without the other. They fall to man, not by chance, but by

¹⁶

Moby-Dick, p. 71.

¹⁷

Henry Alonzo Myers, "Captain Ahab's Discovery: The Tragic Meaning of Moby-Dick," New England Quarterly, XV (March, 1942), 18.

¹⁸

Moby-Dick, p. 193.

... is not a religious problem, but a philosophical one. It is a problem of the nature of evil, and this is a problem which has been discussed by philosophers for many years. The problem of evil is a problem of the nature of evil, and this is a problem which has been discussed by philosophers for many years.

The most controversial meaning of evil is the one which is found in the Bible. This is the meaning of evil which is found in the Bible, and this is the meaning of evil which is found in the Bible. The Bible is a book which is full of stories of evil, and this is the meaning of evil which is found in the Bible. The Bible is a book which is full of stories of evil, and this is the meaning of evil which is found in the Bible.

... is not a religious problem, but a philosophical one. It is a problem of the nature of evil, and this is a problem which has been discussed by philosophers for many years. The problem of evil is a problem of the nature of evil, and this is a problem which has been discussed by philosophers for many years.

inevitable law, which is revealed through characters. In this essential all men have a common fate: no one enjoys without suffering; and no one suffers without enjoying. In another respect all men are different; each lives on his own plane of intensity. But it is the nature of every man to suffer and enjoy in equal degree of intensity. . . . Man broods upon the tantalizing nature of his life, for he thinks that were it not for one chance course of sorrow, his would be a serene and exultant existence. In the end he comes to see that his sorrow is the secret of the power and poignancy of his joy.¹⁹

Myers maintains that Ahab is similar enough to all men to represent them, yet he is high enough above them to perceive and react to dramatic intensity. Ahab's fatal error is in objectifying all evil in one whale and setting out to abolish evil in the Promethean manner. (Myers points out that John Brown, the W. C. T. U., and the Salvation Army have all made similar errors). "The whole romantic world has made Ahab's mistake again and again."²⁰

Ahab's final understanding of his predicament comes only at the moment of his greatest defeat.²¹

Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death! Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hell's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear!²²

¹⁹ Myers, pp. 23-24.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

²¹ Ibid., p. 29.

²² Moby-Dick, p. 530.

LITERARY TECHNIQUE

Recent literary critics have tried to arrive at an explanation of Melville's fascinating and highly individualized literary technique. Melville, who stated in Pierre that he wrote exactly as he pleased, did not please the critics of his day with Moby-Dick. They felt that the book was an abortive attempt at the fusion of numerous intractable elements. Even in the early 1930's critical confusion still existed over the style of Moby-Dick. Perhaps the main fault was that of the critics who classified Moby-Dick as a novel in order to hold literary yardsticks up to it and pronounce it a bad novel. The more recent critics have, in the main, dropped the yardstick and busied themselves with trying to discover what Melville was attempting and how well he succeeded in his attempt.

The distinguished American critic, R. P. Blackmur, has advanced the interesting belief that Melville's literary technique would have been best displayed in the rhetorical Emersonian essay.¹ The novel as a literary form hampered Melville, according to Blackmur. Melville's technique of language did not suit his technique of form. The flaws in the form are, of course, obvious. Blackmur deals with one of

¹ R. P. Blackmur, "The Craft of Herman Melville," The Virginia Quarterly, XIV (Spring, 1936), 280.

the most glaring technical lapses: the shift of consciousness from Ishmael to the author-omniscient when the book is well under way. Blackmur feels that Ishmael, while he is the narrator, is a clever device of consciousness not unlike Lambert Strether in Henry James's The Ambassadors. Since the essence of the story would, of necessity, escape the consciousness of Ishmael, Blackmur feels that Melville would have been justified in his shift of consciousness had he distinguished the difference of narrators in the text.

Blackmur sees the cetology as the great dramatic interest of the novel. Melville's rhetorical eloquence makes Moby-Dick in his estimation "a great novel below the first order."² In the craft of language Blackmur believes that Moby-Dick is admirable when it is far away from convention and when Melville is employing the real syntax of imaginative language. The Gothic touches are Moby-Dick's blemishes, Blackmur feels. One example of Melville's freedom in Moby-Dick from novel form, plot, and Gothic influences is Father Mapple's sermon. "The curiosity that needs emphasis here is that the vices of Melville's style either disappeared or revealed themselves as virtues when he shifted his mode to the Sermon . . . because he had found a mode which suited the bent of his themes."³

²
Ibid., p. 274.

³
Ibid., p. 281.

Blackmur's conclusion is that Melville triumphed over his chosen literary form, the novel, because of his rhetorical technique.

Leon Howard takes a different view and declares that Moby-Dick is Melville's only successful venture in literary art. From his earlier novels, which Howard does not consider art, Melville drew the techniques of suspense and allusiveness--the intellectual suggestion that grips the reader but not the character.⁴

Howard has an elaborate suggestion based on the 1850 revision of Moby-Dick: the book that had been a "down-to-the-sea-in-ships" tale or a boy's account of whaling became the tractable material upon which Melville employed his two greatest influences, Shakespeare and Hawthorne. The tragic vision is from Shakespeare and the "quest" form is traceable to Hawthorne.⁵ The technique that appeared in Moby-Dick was the result of a craftsmanship that was "little more than that of an extraordinarily talented amateur--effective only when external influences and personal experiences were united in a fortunate, but largely fortuitous combination."⁶

Carlos Baker, on the other hand, attributes Melville's technique to a matured sense of balance. By his definition,

⁴ Leon Howard, "Melville's Struggle with the Angle," Modern Language Quarterly, I (June, 1940), 196.

⁵ Ibid., p. 203.

⁶ Ibid., p. 206.

...the very form, the novel, because of its technical...

...the technical of suspense and of the...
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THE END

art is a balance of the substance of thought and the substance of things.⁷ He cites War and Peace, Huckleberry Finn, and Crime and Punishment as sharing this balance with Moby-Dick. The substance is whaling and cetology, and the thought is man's quality of being unvanquishable. One need only visit a whaling museum to see what extent Melville gave life to his subject matter. Baker believes that the blend of substance is perfect and that Moby-Dick is therefore a masterpiece of the caliber of War and Peace.

There is general agreement among recent critics that Melville borrowed certain dramatic effects from the Gothic novels to capture audience interest in Moby-Dick. Newton Arvin, for example, points out that all Melville's novels had Gothic touches and that Moby-Dick was no exception. The introduction of the Pequod is an example of Melville using horror technique. The ship is described in gloomy adjectives as a weather-stained hull with a venerable bow, spire-like masts and ancient decks. This is one example of many that Arvin cites to illustrate the connection between Melville and the Gothic novel.⁸

Two critics come to Melville's defense to save him from the literary company of Mrs. Radcliffe. Reginald Cook finds Ahab's magical rites less related to the Gothic novel than

⁷ Carlos Baker, "Of Art and Artifacts," New York Times Book Review, LII (August, 1947), 2.

⁸ Newton Arvin, "Melville and the Gothic Novel," New England Quarterly, XXII (March, 1949), 34.

related to the practices of a primitive medicine man.⁹ He believes that it is the primitive mystic that Melville created in Ahab. Cook points out that the primitive has no faith in his rites but rather practices defiance of the elements and the gods. In Ahab's defiance of the elements comes his strength and faith. His arrogance wins the faith of the men, and his death is that of a proud medicine man, consistent in his beliefs: "Towards thee I roll, thou all destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee."¹⁰ The seemingly Gothic touch of tempering the harpoons in blood has been explained by Joseph Jones, who contends that from ancient times on, blood has been employed by primitives as an excellent agent for tempering hot steel.¹¹

N. Bryllion Fagin pointed out that Melville's method may well have been the forerunner of the stream of consciousness technique exemplified by James Joyce.¹² Chapters XXXVII, XXXVIII, and XXXIX are written in the interior monologue which

⁹ Reginald Cook, "Big Medicine in Moby-Dick," Accent, VIII (Winter, 1948), 104.

¹⁰ Moby-Dick, p. 530.

¹¹ Joseph Jones, "Ahab's Blood-Quench: Theater or Metalurgy," American Literature, XVIII (March, 1946), 35.

¹² N. Bryllion Fagin, "Herman Melville and the Interior Monologue," American Literature, VI (January, 1935), 434.

Fagin believes is a link between the Shakespearean soliloquy and Joyce's more modern technique. Shakespeare's influence on Melville's style is here quite obvious. Dramatic headings and stage directions are interspersed with the monologue. Melville is closest to Joyce in the subconscious ruminations of Ahab at the close of Chapter CXXVII:

(Ahab to Himself)

There's a sight! There's a sound! The greyheaded woodpecker tapping the hollow tree! Blind and dumb night well be envied now. See! that thing rests on two line-tubs, full of tow-lines. A most malicious wag, that fellow. Rat-tat! So man's seconds tick! Oh! how immaterial are all materials! What things real are there, but imponderable thoughts?¹³

Critics of Melville's style and literary technique have failed to keep pace with those critics who have analyzed the symbolism and source material of Moby-Dick.

SOURCE MATERIAL

The recent criticism of Melville in periodicals has produced a vast amount of important material concerning Melville's sources in Moby-Dick. Unquestionably the most startling writer working in this field is Charles Olson. Although Olson's literary form for presenting his findings is very avant-garde, his material is of the utmost importance for an understanding of Melville's literary background and how he employed it in creating his masterpiece.

In his article, "Lear and Moby-Dick," Olson suggests that Moby-Dick was precipitated by Melville's reading of Shakespeare.¹ Melville's discovery of Shakespeare at the age of twenty-nine made little change in his vision of life, Olson contends, but rather it was the stimulus that provided objectification and articulation of that vision. Shakespeare acted as the catalytic agent that brought Melville's literary gifts to their full rhetorical brilliance.

From Olson's study of Melville's underlinings in his edition of Shakespeare's works, he has discovered certain vital parallels between Moby-Dick and King Lear. In Melville's article, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," he has this to say about Shakespeare:

¹ Charles Olson, "Lear and Moby-Dick," Twice a Year, I (Fall-Winter, 1938), 165.

THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

The theory of knowledge of reality in psychology has been

developed in a series of stages. In the first stage, the theory was based on the idea of a fixed, unchanging reality. In the second stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is in a state of flux. In the third stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind.

In the fourth stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux. In the fifth stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux. In the sixth stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux.

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In the eleventh stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux. In the twelfth stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux. In the thirteenth stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux.

In the fourteenth stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux. In the fifteenth stage, the theory was based on the idea of a reality that is constructed by the mind and is in a state of flux.

In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote. And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare; and other masters of the great art of Telling the Truth,-- even though it be covertly and by snatches.²

Shakespeare expresses this idea in King Lear, as Olson points out: "Fool: Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipp'd out, when Lady the brach may stand by th' fire and stink."

[Act I, Scene IV, ll. 124-126]. It is Olson's contention that it was Shakespeare the truthteller, and not Shakespeare the playwright whom Melville admired and simulated in Moby-Dick. Chronologically the evidence is convincing: Melville's earlier works were novels in the common sense of the word, but Moby-Dick--written shortly after Melville studied King Lear--defies conventional form to communicate Melville's vision of the truth.³

Another facet of Shakespeare that impressed Melville was Shakespeare's ability to speak the truth through evil men: "Edmund: Some good I mean to do, Despite of mine own nature." [Act V, Scene III, ll. 243-244]. Melville's admiration for this passage is illustrated by another quotation from the Hawthorne essay: "Tormented into destruction, Lear, the frantic

²
Herman Melville, The Complete Works of Herman Melville (London, 1922-1924), XIII, 131.

³
Olson, p. 168.

King, tears off the mask, and speaks the same madness of vital truth."⁴

Olson discloses that in the back of Melville's edition of Lear was written, "Ego non baptizo te in nomine Patria et Filii et Spiritus Sancti--sed in nomine Diaboli."⁵ This passage reappears almost intact in Moby-Dick during Ahab's somewhat Gothic religious rites.

On the surface, the world of Ahab would appear to be closer to that of Macbeth, with its prophecies, supernatural occurrences, and identification with evil. Yet Olson's argument is convincing that the theme of madness and its undefinable divination of truth is the primary Shakespearian influence on Melville. Lear and the Fool are certainly, in this light, parallel to Ahab and Pip. Olson's contention is that Ahab cannot read truth because of his Faustian compact with Fedallah. Lear can attain to the truth by losing his pride.

In his copy of King Lear Melville noted that "right reason" was the way to attain to God.⁶ Olson believes that two characters in Moby-Dick typify this to Melville: Bulkington, who reasons that landlessness is the highest truth; and Ishmael, who alone hears out Father Mapple's sermon, understands Pip, and narrates the story.

⁴ Melville, p. 130.

⁵ Olson, p. 174.

⁶ Ibid., p. 176.

Olson believes that Ahab, like Lear, has a fatal pride that builds to a tremendous pitch and then breaks down in a love for humanity. Ahab's treatment of Pip at the close of the book is similar to Lear's treatment of the Fool. Olson claims that "these rough manuscript notes of blasphemy, madness, and magic which Melville jotted down in his copy of Shakespeare lead into the splintered heart of Moby-Dick."⁷ The action of the novel is Learish in that it is dark and dramatic. Somewhat more questionable, I believe, is Olson's contention that Moby-Dick is an unstageable drama, that the chapters on cetology are the comic sub-plot and the various boats are the moving material.

Olson's conclusions are that Melville thought that since he was writing in a democracy, he could improve on Shakespeare in telling the ultimate truth. However, Melville learned from Shakespeare that subjective rather than outward conflicts are the stuff of creation.⁸

The importance of Charles Olson's criticism is not that it establishes Shakespeare's influence on Melville, but rather that, from his research on Melville's underlinings, he has discovered specific passages which indicate a degree of influence.

⁷ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸ Ibid., p. 189.

An interesting possibility for a source of Moby-Dick was put forth by the late Robert Forsythe. He establishes the fact that there was an albino whale story floating around New England when Melville was a boy. Emerson noted it in his Journals as being an old story in 1839.⁹ The whale was called "Old Tom" and was relentlessly pursued by many whalers. It was taken, according to this story, either by the Essex or the Winslow. As Forsythe points out, this story precedes Reynolds's Mocha Dick, which had previously been assumed to be Melville's source.¹⁰

Sherman Paul has suggested that the folk tales of the West helped Melville form his American hero. The legend of Mike Fink, the canalman, seems to have worked its way into Moby-Dick in "The Town Ho's Story" in the character of Steelkilt.

Melville's source for the folk tale was probably the widely known "The Last of the Boatmen" by Morgan Neville. Melville's description of Steelkilt often parallels Neville's description of Mike Fink.¹¹

The vivid figure of Father Mapple, the preacher at the Seamen's Bethel, is probably drawn from life, according to R. E. Watters. Walt Whitman's description of Edward Thompson Taylor's church coincides with many of the details of Melville's

⁹ R. S. Forsythe, "Emerson and Moby-Dick," Notes and Queries, CLXXVII (December, 1939), 457.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sherman Paul, "Morgan Neville, Melville and the Folk Hero," Notes and Queries, CXCIV (June, 1949), 278.

an important responsibility for a number of years.

He was in the United States for a long time.

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description of Father Mapple's church. Although there is no evidence to prove it, it is not inconceivable that Melville had seen this common, folksy preacher since he had courted his wife in New Bedford at the same time that Taylor preached there.¹² In a larger sense, Father Mapple is, of course, a brilliant original creation of the imagination. Father Mapple is larger than life, but Watters' contention is that he grew out of the life of his prototype, Father Taylor.

Elizabeth Foster has noted that Melville made use of geology books in the creation of Moby-Dick.¹³ They provided him with a cosmic sweep, a sense of vastness and timelessness in his imagery that was invaluable to his art:

I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun; for time began with man. . . . when wedged bastions of ice pressed hard upon what are now the Tropics; . . . Then the whole world was the whale's; and, king of creation, he left his wake along the present lines of the Andes and the Himalahs.¹⁴

Magnificent as his use of geology was, Melville did not always employ the science accurately. Melville employed so many sources while writing Moby-Dick that they may never all be accurately compiled. Working at a white-heat to produce

¹²

R. E. Watters, "Boston's Salt Water Preacher," South Atlantic Quarterly, XIV (July, 1946), 360.

¹³

Elizabeth Foster, "Melville and Geology," American Literature, XVII (March, 1945), 65.

¹⁴

Moby-Dick, p. 428.

the book in one year, it is understandable that Melville would slip into inaccuracies in his imagery and descriptive touches.

Another book that Melville used during the year of Moby-Dick's composition was Journal of a Voyage to the Northern Whale-Fishery, by William Scoresby, Jr. Wilson Heflin discovered that Melville took this book from the New York Society Library and returned it only when Moby-Dick was running through the presses.¹⁵ Heflin suggests that the Journal contains all the raw facts that Melville employed concerning the Pequod's compasses and Ahab's handling of their polarity. He prints passages of the Journal alongside the corresponding passages in Moby-Dick to show borrowings which extend even to the point of carrying over the image of "knitting needles" for compass needles.¹⁶ Melville obviously was striving for accuracy in his description of nautical phenomena. Again, Melville took a source and raised it to dramatic significance.

Henry F. Pommer has pointed out the use of another source for Moby-Dick: the Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex, by Owen Chase. In the leaves of this book Melville wrote of how he first met Owen Chase's son and heard of the Essex, a whaling ship that was sunk by a whale. According to Pommer, the book supplies

¹⁵ Wilson Heflin, "The Source of Ahab's Lordship over the Level Loadstone," American Literature, XX (November, 1948), 323.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 327.

six quotations (one for the Extracts by a sub-sub librarian) and material for two chapters of cetology--"The Affidavit" and "The Battering Ram."¹⁷ For example, in Chase's book the following passage appears: "The eyes and ears are removed nearly one-third the length of the whole fish, from the front part of the head, and are not in the least endangered in the mode of attack."¹⁸ And in Moby-Dick: "You observe that his eyes and ears are at the sides of his head, nearly one third of his entire length from the front."¹⁹

Of incidental interest is the fact that Charles R. Anderson has checked the certificate of registrations of the Essex and the Acushnet and neither matches Melville's description of the Pequod.²⁰ Anderson believes that Melville was beyond employing autobiography as a source when he wrote Moby-Dick. James D. Hart agrees with this opinion and adds that Dana's sea books had little influence on Melville, or Melville's return to the sea. He points out the possible satire on Dana

¹⁷

Henry F. Pommer, "Herman Melville and the Wake of the Essex," American Literature, XX (November, 1948), 292.

¹⁸

Owen Chase, Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex (New York, 1821), p. 38.

¹⁹

Moby-Dick, p. 316.

²⁰

Charles R. Anderson, "The Romance of Scholarship: Tracing Melville in the South Seas," Colophon, n.s. III (Spring, 1938), 271.

in Moby-Dick:²¹ "For nowadays, the whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking care of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber."²²

The source work on Melville has been interesting, rather than exhaustive. An extensive check-list of Melville's reading²³ shows how far this study could be carried. To date, the important sources have been ably presented in the recent criticism in books and periodicals.

²¹ James D. Hart, "Melville and Dana," American Literature, IX (March, 1937), 49.

²² Moby-Dick, p. 148.

²³ Merton Sealts, "A Check List of Melville's Reading," Harvard Library Bulletin, II (Spring, 1948), 141-163.

CONCLUSION

What the white whale
was to Ahab, has been
hinted; what, at times,
he was to me, as yet
remains unsaid.¹

Herman Melville

I believe it is evident that Moby-Dick has received more attention in the last fifteen years than ever before. However, there can be no question that criticism has, in some way, failed to conquer Moby-Dick. As Yvor Winters put it: "The field of Melville criticism is far more heartening than it was thirty years ago, for there is much activity; the same activity, unfortunately, is for the great part desperately confused."²

The desperate confusion is everywhere apparent. Few critics are in agreement on any aspect of Moby-Dick, save its

¹ Moby-Dick, p. 176.

² Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1948), p. 200.

greatness. Perhaps the greatest confusion arises over the heart of the novel, its meaning, and its symbolism. Moby-Dick has always presented a challenge to critics. The early critics, generally speaking, misread it. Today's critics are in danger of reading too much into it.

Some critics (I would cite Richard Chase and W. S. Gleim as examples) have treated Moby-Dick to an analysis that can only be called creative, not critical. These critics have done work that they feel Melville left undone. Chase, for example, has devoted a good deal of attention to highlighting Melville's use of American folk tales in Moby-Dick. He seems unaware that the mere presence of folk tale material in a work is not, by itself, at all relevant to the work's artistic merit. Gleim's attempts to grapple with Moby-Dick have produced an interpretation so original that it may be called completely creative. Melville's novel was merely a point of departure for Gleim's creative talents. Yet these critics, together with other, less diffuse critics, have all had something of importance to say about Moby-Dick.

On the other hand, no critic (with the possible exception of Matthiessen) has created a permanent impression on critical views of Moby-Dick. This is a testament perhaps to the book's critical intractability. It may also be a testament to a fundamental failing in recent criticism.

I believe it is apparent from a study of this criticism that Moby-Dick is more popular now than ever before in spite of the confusion extant among critics. I believe that we have, in Moby-Dick, a work, like Hamlet or the Divine Comedy, that is impervious and intractable to criticism. If this premise is allowed, then the recent criticism is in no way a failure. Although no one interpretation of Moby-Dick may be completely satisfying, the sum total of all the recent work on the novel is a rich tapestry of conflicting, yet rewarding, interpretations. Each reader must, like the critic, come to grips with Moby-Dick for himself. The richness and variety of the recent criticism may aid the reader in sensing the significance of the various conflicting interpretations. Therein lies its value, and I believe that its value is great.

The disagreement among critics has shown not a failing but a depth in Moby-Dick. When studied as subjective criticism, the work of these critics is brilliant. And Moby-Dick must be read subjectively. The critics have read it subjectively, and the readers must read both the book and the criticism subjectively if either is to have any value. The meaning of Moby-Dick is not a constant thing to be accepted dogmatically from any one critic. The meaning will vary with each reader. And for this reason, Moby-Dick, like other classics holding many meanings, will endure as one of America's finest contributions to literature.

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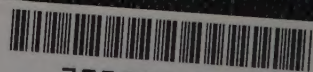
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